

Dying Voice

(An Anthropological Novel)

Andrew K. Tanui



VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

Dying Voice

Dying Voice

Zapf Chancery Publications

- A Guide to Academic Writing* by C. B. Peter (1994)
Africa in the 21st Century by Eric M. Aseka (1996)
Women in Development by Egara Kabaji (1997)
Mwongozo wa Visiki by James O. Omari (1997)
Technical Institutions in Kenya: A Directory by I. K. Koech (1997)
Mwongozo wa Siku Njema By James O. Omari and Sam Obuchi (1999)
Introducing Social Science: A Guidebook by J. H. van Doorne (2000)
Elementary Statistics by J. H. van Doorne (2001)
Iteso Survival Rites on the Birth of Twins by Festus B. Omusolo (2001)
The Church in the New Millennium: Three Studies in the Acts of the Apostles by John Stott (2002)
Introduction to Philosophy in an African Perspective by Cletus N. Chukwu (2002)
Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation by Francis W. Mulwa and Simon N. Nguluu (2003)
Applied Ethics and HIV/AIDS in Africa by Cletus N. Chukwu (2003)
For God and Humanity: 100 Years of St. Paul's United Theological College Edited by Emily Onyango (2003)
Establishing and Managing School Libraries and Resource Centres by Margaret Makenzi and Raymond Ongus (2003)
Introduction to the Study of Religion by Nehemiah Nyaundi (2003)
A Guest in God's World: Memories of Madagascar by Patricia McGregor (2004)
Introduction to Critical Thinking by J. Kahiga Kiruki (2004)
Theological Education in Contemporary Africa edited by Grant LeMarquand and Joseph D. Galgalo (2004)
Looking Religion in the Eye edited by Kennedy Onkware (2004)
Computer Programming: Theory and Practice by Gerald Injendi (2005)
Demystifying Participatory Development by Francis W. Mulwa (2005)
Music Education in Kenya: A Historical Perspective by Hellen A. Odwar (2005)
Integrating HIV/AIDS into Ethics Curriculum Edited by Charles Klagba and C. B. Peter (2005)
Participatory Learning and Action (PLA): A Guide to Best Practice by Enoch Harun Opuka (2006)
Human Suffering and Existence: An Enquiry into Kierkegaard by John M. M. Kasyoka (2006)
Science and Human Values edited by Nehemiah Nyaundi and Kennedy Onkware (2006)
Dying Voice (An Anthropological Novel) by Andrew K. Tanui (2006)

Dying Voice
(An Anthropological Novel)

Andrew K. Tanui



Zapf Chancery
Eldoret, Kenya

Dying Voice

First Published 2006

© Andrew K. Tanui

All rights reserved.

Cover concept and design by

C. B. Peter

Typesetting, layout and design by

Zapf Chancery

Edited by

C. B. Peter

Printed by

Kijabe Printing Press,

P. O. Box 40,

Kijabe.

Published by



Zapf Chancery Research Consultants and Publishers,

P. O. Box 4988,

Eldoret, Kenya.

Email: zapfchancerykenya@yahoo.co.uk

Mobile: 0721-222 311 or 0733-915 814

ISBN ISBN 9966-9925-3-7

*To my father Lawrence Kiptanui Sang (Kapsiirng'ot)
and to the loving memory of my Mother,
Esther Chemutai Sang (Kabar-gero)*

Dying Voice

Foreword

Rev. Andrew Tanui has narrated, in the form of a novel, the cultural practices and beliefs of the Kalenjin community on the cattle raid. It is true that heroes were named depending on their successes and victories of their raids and number of cows brought home from those they perceived as their enemies.

These cattle raids brought gain to the community in acquiring more territories and more wealth for the dowry and prestige. It is on record that one can be a spokesman depending on the wealth he has and the number of wives he has married. Stories were told along this practice and on animals' grazing.

Prayers were always offered to Asis by tribal elders for peace, good living, more animals and harmony among families, and also for more children.

This narrative should be understood as not the same as the present cattle raids that have caused great loss of lives and properties.

Today's raids are as a result of enmity, envy, jealousy and poverty.

I trust and hope that many will read this story to understand our past heritage in contrast to the present Kalenjin livelihood.

I thank Rev. Andrew Tanui for his excellent effort in telling this story. I gladly commend this book to all readers.

THE RT. REV. STEPHEN KEWASIS NYORSOK
BISHOP OF KITALE
Anglican Church of Kenya

Dying Voice

Preface

I should like to pay my special gratitude to many Kony, Maasai and Nandi elders for their willing participation in my research and freely sharing and discussing with me many issues highlighted in this book. I felt deeply moved when I realized that inside the minds of our elders is a hidden treasure of knowledge that needs tapping for future generations as it will improve the cultural values of our people.

Research is a rigorous discipline that consumes a lot of time in patiently obtaining and evaluating information. The whole project has taken me over eleven years to complete it.

During this period I interviewed many resourceful elders and leaders in authority either individually or through group discussions. I also read many books and manuals related to the Kalenjin people. I also took into account many oral stories as told by grandmothers. I paid special attention to songs, poems and proverbs used by the people, without which the project could have remained incomplete.

While researching on this book, I encountered many obstacles. On one occasion I was almost beaten when the Kapkwambisi saga came up in my discussion with the Kony elders. They shed tears as they recalled many deaths and sufferings brought about by the Nandi warriors. The question they asked loudly was: “If the Nandi people are really our relatives, why did they massacre our people?” One other problem I came upon was that some elders were very uncooperative and at times demanded money for giving information. At times I was called names and chased away. But with patience and persistence I won in the end. My greatest challenge, however,

was finances. I depended on my own meager resources apart from a little assistance that I received from friends and relatives.

The purposes of writing this book are many. I had in mind the idea of bringing to light the original relevance of cattle raid and their consequences. The book also reflects on the actions of our people that brought havoc later in life. Another purpose of this book is to revisit the old way of life including traditional norms. These norms can be helpful in guiding the lives of the people of today. This book is also meant to serve as a healing touch to the most affected people in cattle-raids, especially the Kony community. I hope that young readers of this book will use their own strength and talents in generating their own incomes rather than causing other people to suffer. The final purpose of this book was to collect primary data on the Nandi traditional life, to weave the data together in the form of a narrative, and to make the same available to students and teachers of cultural anthropology.

I hope that readers, both academic and non-academic, will find this book useful.

Andrew K. Tanui
Kitale, Kenya
September 2006

Acknowledgements

In the course of researching, compiling and writing this book, I received valuable assistance from many individuals whom I would like to recognize. The list includes various resourceful elders like the late Samuel Kiptogom Arap Barno, of Kapbaras (Nandi District), Mr. Jairo Arap Kurgat of Kapngeny, the late Philemon Arap Letting, and Mr. Paulo Arap Rop of Trans-Nzoia district. Also included are the late Daniel Ptalla and Revd. Daniel Sinjor of Mt. Elgon District. To add on the list are Mr. Ole Kongu and Mr. Ole Kaiboi of Kilgoris, Trans Mara district.

I am sincerely grateful to the following people who assisted me much in reading, correcting and updating the material in the earlier drafts of the manuscript. These are Mr. Naftali Tuwei from the DEO's, Kitale, Mr. Christopher Arap Sang from the ACK Diocesan Office, Kitale, Mr. Samwel Maritim from Trans-Nzoia, Mr. David Korir of EATEC, Eldoret, Mr. David Tanui of Kaptumo, Mr. Samwel Ngeny, former MP and Deputy Speaker of our National Assembly, the Revd. John Rotich and the Rev. Moses Tebui of ACK Eldoret Diocese, and the Rt. Rev. Stephen Kewasis Nyorsok, Bishop of ACK Kitale Diocese.

I would also like to thank our ACK Eldoret Region Company offices for the secretarial services, and moral support. These include the Executive Director, Mr. Jackson Sambu and his entire staff.

I gratefully acknowledge the courtesy of the National Museums of Kenya, Kitale for their kind permission to photograph certain

items in their collection on Nandi traditional life, and to publish such photographs in this book. I am especially grateful to the Senior Curator and members of staff of the Museum for their kind cooperation, encouragement and support.

I owe a special debt of gratitude to my publishers, M/S Zapf Chancery Research Consultants and Publishers, Eldoret, Kenya, for publishing this book. I especially recognize the hard work and expertise invested in this book by my friend, Rev. C. B. Peter, Founder and Senior Publishing Consultant at Zapf Chancery. Rev. Peter edited the work three times to enhance its readability. He also offered valuable consultancy in research, writing and publishing, and diligently oversaw the overall publishing management of the entire project. Furthermore, as the editor of this book, Rev. Peter also explained certain details in footnotes.

Finally, I acknowledge the unfailing support and encouragement from my family. I am grateful to our sons Oscar Kipkemboi Too and Felton Kipkurui Too, and our daughters Nancy Cherotich and Hellen Rehema Jerubet for their tremendous inspiration in the course of writing. Above all, my loving wife Jeniffer played a leading role in the entire project. She firmly stood by my side.

AKT

Introduction

Why is it that the story I have told in this book has haunted the memory of our people since time immemorial? Sigilai Arap Tormoi, the hero and narrator himself participated in all the events in this story. He saw season after season and raid after raid and how the Nandi people and their land could not be the same again. It was just like torrential rains that caused more havoc than blessings. Our hero underwent various moods. At times, he was depressed, sick, lonely, and sorrowful, while at other times he was enthusiastic, romantic, cheerful and hilarious.

He was brought up in the original Kalenjin way of life. His naked soul excavated the blameless tribal wisdom. He saw the changes in the society. He belonged to the age-set of Kaplelach. The life of an age-set was about a hundred years. This means that during the next period of about a hundred years no youngster would be named in the Kaplelach age set. Only after a hundred years would the cycle be complete and a youngster's age-set would be called Kaplelach. Our narrator lived throughout the age-set of Kaplelach to see a youngster being called after that age-set, about a hundred years later.

He saw the Kalenjin community disintegrating, being trodden underfoot, neglected and tattered. He witnessed a new society emerging with scattered ideologies, prone to indiscipline, perversions and abuse.

With bitterness, he replays the horrid tale spanning several generations.

The Kalenjin community comprises the tribes of the Kipsigis, the Tugen, the Keiyo, the Marakwet, the Pokot, the Kony, the Pongomek, the Mosopcho, the Sabiny, the Terik, and the Sengwer (Cherangany). Unfortunately, today the Kalenjin community is not quite as united as it used to be long ago.

For example, no one today seems to remember the name of Kingo, the community's ancestral father. Nobody remembers that the Kony and the Nandi are cousins with a common origin. Though we speak different dialects of the same language, our norms and customs are much the same.

Unfortunately, today the Kony and the Nandi live like strangers to one another. I feel that the time has come that all the sons and daughters of Kingo should realize their original affinity and live as true brothers and sisters.

The characters in this story are fictitious, except some notable individuals. These include: the seer Arap Sirtoet, the *Orkoiyot* Kimnyole, Arap Chomu of Kaptalam clan, Arap Kitongo of the clan of Kapchepkendi and Songoro Arap Sisiwa.

Contents

<i>Foreword.....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Preface.....</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Acknowledgements.....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Introduction.....</i>	<i>13</i>
Prologue.....	17
Chapter One: Those Were the Days.....	21
Chapter Two: We Blew the Horn.....	91
Chapter Three: We Laughed.....	165
Ancient Nandi Life in Pictures.....	213
Chapter Four: We Cried.....	217
Chapter Five: A Dream Come True.....	279
Epilogue.....	331
<i>Appendix A : Nandi Clans and Their Totems.....</i>	<i>333</i>
<i>Appendix B: Nandi Age-Sets.....</i>	<i>334</i>

<i>Appendix C: Nandi Age-Sets and Related Events.....</i>	<i>335</i>
<i>Appendix D: Nandi Divisions.....</i>	<i>337</i>
<i>Appendix E: Nandi Divisions' Settlement.....</i>	<i>339</i>
<i>Appendix F: Glossary of Nandi Words and Proverbs.....</i>	<i>341</i>
<i>The Author.....</i>	<i>347</i>

Prologue

Woi! Woi! Woi! Woi! lagokyok! Woi, where do we go?

The early morning calm was shattered as mothers wailed for their sons who perished in the war.

Bwo! Bwo! Bwo! Bwo we! Lagokyok (ye our children) what finished you? Are they animals or enemies? What killed you? What k....i....i.....i..... A mother asked again and again as she fainted.

Wui! Wui! Wui! Wui my husband! My Husband! Wui my husband! Where will I go? A young woman lamented as she realised that she already was a widow.

Iii! Iii! Iii! Iii! Iii! My father, my father! Woi! Woi! Woi! My father! A young girl cried as she remembered her beloved father whom she was to see no more.

Bwo! Bwo! Bwo! Bwo we! Murenju (ye men). We thought you would make our land prosperous. Old men lamented, clapping their hands, “Who will defend our country now that you are gone?”

Many young men were writhing in fits of anger. Some were rescued from killing themselves. It was one of those gloomy days.

My three friends and I watched dumbly the mourning at our home of Kaptumek in Southern Nandi. We were the only survivors of the Kapkwambisi cattle raid.

After calmness had been restored, the aged tribal patriarch, Telenges stood and facing the East, he prayed:

Asis! Asis! Asis! Asis! Kasech kakisain
Asis! Konech sapon
Asis! Kakile oiyo
*Asis! Tukwech chuto*¹

I remember everything now as my mind is haunted by the events that took place a long time ago, when I was a young warrior. This was long before the salt coloured people had stepped into the Nandi country. Now I am so old that my weak legs can no longer support my body. I am left to crawl like a child. Of late my aged wife has been complaining that our house and bedding smell of urine. This is true. On most occasions as I start towards the door of my hut, I find that my bladder is already emptied between my bed and the doorpost. Sorrowfully, I crawl back to my bed. It is the bitter experience in my life. I never knew that a time would ever come that I would become like a baby. Can you imagine that my own sons, whom I brought forth from my own loins, have begun calling me *Agui*² and their mother *Kogo*!³

¹God! God! God! God! Hear us, we pray.

God! Give us health.

God! We are sorry.

God! Cover for us these remaining ones.

²Grandfather

³Grandmother

“*Agui, kogo* has been complaining of late that the house smells of urine. What is the matter?” My eldest son is facing me about what he has heard from his mother.

“You see, when I try to crawl outside, my bladder moves faster than my feet can. Should you blame me for this?” I asked while clattering my toothless gums. Of late my bony hands are tricky. They shake like leaves in dry season. Even getting a snuff is a problem these days.

“If people were still going to the Land of *Sheu*, I would have gone there long ago than endure all this here,” I lament aloud as I remember what people of my age would have done then. I laugh to myself as I remember my grandfather. One day he said that he wanted to answer an urgent summons that he had heard. When asked who was calling him, he said, “So and so are calling me,” mentioning the names of his departed friends. “They are saying, ‘hurry, for the harvesting is at hand and various feasts have been prepared.’” The next day my grandfather and his other age-mates went to *Sheu* carrying millet flour and malt in baskets. Towards a precipice they went. And on approaching, they placed their loads on their heads, and began to dance moving backwards towards the precipice. All of a sudden, they slipped and down they rolled to the bottom. And so they went to *Sheu*, the land of the spirits, the country of the departed ancestors.

I wish I too could depart to *Sheu* now. But it seems this is no longer possible. Times have changed.

My mind has become like an old calabash filled with convulsing *mursik*.⁴ The haunting memories inside my mind are always rumbling. The calabash is already cracking. I do not know how long before the calabash breaks and I depart to the Land of *Sheu*.

⁴Fermented milk.

I am an old man now, and that is why my great, great grandchildren are always running away from me. They keep calling me an animal. Maybe I do resemble an aged monkey. Maybe.

As I have said that the past events have led to the torture of my soul. The scene of the massacre of my departed colleagues, as it keeps coming back to my memory, has tortured me all my life.

Why have those events related to the Kapkwambisi raid kept haunting me for many, many years? Why can I not forget the faces of my massacred colleagues? That is a long story. Perhaps I should begin at the very beginning. This was many, many years ago, in another world, in another life. I was a very young man then.

CHAPTER ONE

Those Were the Days

1

The girls' circumcision season was drawing near. Our lovers were already preparing for their circumcision and subsequent marriages. Alas, we did not own a single cow yet! For a long time, the beautiful girls had ignored us. As we watched helplessly, the sons of the wealthy married as many women as they wished. But our lovers had told us off. They were not interested in our poverty. They were only interested in cows. And we knew that this was what every young woman was interested in. So our choices were clear—either go for cattle-raids and bring cows, or stay poor bachelors for the rest of our lives.

2

We were on a security mission.

I was with my close friends, Kibiwot and Kipsugut, at an outpost near Ol'Lessos. We were talking about so many things, especially our needs to get wives and respect in the society.

Our sharp eyes moved across all directions. Our responsibility was to ensure that any unknown intruders (especially spies or enemies' warriors) were detected at a safe distance. For this

purpose, we were on a high ground protected by bushes. Occasionally we would climb tall trees to have a better view of the surrounding.

The jungle teemed with wild animals like lions, leopards, elephants, buffaloes and rhinos. These animals were a constant danger to the whole tribe. Therefore, we had to watch their movements and inform the people at home to take precautions. We ourselves were in danger from human enemies, wild animals and reptiles.

Our eyes were of great help for the security of the land. Only people known for powers of keen observation were honoured with the responsibility of guarding the land.

Suddenly, I saw a movement far ahead. First, I thought it was an animal but later realised that it was a human being, a Maasai spy. Other warriors at a distance followed him thinking that no one was watching them. Finally, they neared our hideout. We were ready with our bows and arrows. Kibiwot shot an arrow that connected beautifully with the shoulder of their ringleader who screamed before falling dead. The rest, on realizing what had happened, disappeared into all directions yelling. They were never to be seen again. We changed our position to another safe post as we prepared to inform our people back home.

We were very strong, courageous, knowledgeable and handsome. Our hair were plaited and smeared with ochre soil mixed with oil, while our *Kipook*¹ made out of calves' skins were well oiled and smooth. Our shoes made out of buffaloes' skins were strong and impressive. Each of us had a spear, a bow, a quiver of arrows, a club, a sword and a shield. Around our waists were strong skin belts that held a club and a sword while the quivers of arrows were strapped onto our shoulders. Our hands held the remaining

¹Tunics

weapons. We talked in low tones jubilantly as we approved what we had done. For several days we watched for a retaliation visit by the Maasai, commonly known to our people as *Kamoriongek*. Fortunately, nothing happened.

3

“It was time we were married, gentlemen,” I said, “and yet we have no cows to pay as dowry. Chesondin, that sweetheart of mine has confirmed that after the next harvesting season she and the rest will be circumcised. She has also confided to me that the son of Kimaget, the rich man, has approached her many times and intends to make her his third wife. Also her father is being invited to that family for beer parties. This is bad news to me. It is giving me sleepless nights. I hate loosing her, especially after I have lost Chepkigen who got married to the other man. I must do something.”

“We have attained the age of marriage, and yet we are poor,” rejoined Kipsugut. “I would also like to marry my girl. She is very charming and I would hate to lose her to some influential wealthy man. If I don’t marry her, I would rather be re-circumcised,” he said while grinding his teeth as an indication that he was serious.

Kipsugut was short and stout, and full of muscles. His chest was broad and he breathed heavily. People feared his red eyes. He was slow in talk, but swift in action. When he spoke in a gathering, people needed a lot of patience as his words were more borrowed than owned. More often he talked with his eyes almost closed. People could mistake him for a shyster but he was not. To him every word spoken was an asset and needed to be weighed carefully. He was a wise man.

It was said that once upon a time, one of Kipsugut’s age-mates had tried to commit suicide complaining that his father was against

him. This man was a coward. He was lazy and rude and wanted and wanted to marry a woman without the necessary preparations.

Kipsugut was asked to counsel him. After learning the mournful complaints from his fellowman, he asked him, "So according to you, it is better to die than to accept the wise counsel of your father and your clan?"

"But my father is against the choice of a girl I wanted to marry." The man replied.

"Do you own any cow in your father's Kraal?"

"No"

Kipsugut produced a strong rope that he had hidden in his garment.

He extended it to him while saying, "If that is all, then go ahead and hang yourself. And never blame anybody for your own blunders. After all, the death of an individual is not the death of a whole clan." For a long time, the man stared at the rope extended to him. He went away shaking his head and never threatened people again with suicide.

Another member of our group, Kibiwot, was a short, plump, and bow-legged young man. He looked like a gorilla while standing in a manner that a full ram could easily pass between his legs. People would joke about him, but secretly, as he was a rough man.

He had a very strong body and never appeared tired even though he did hard work every day. He was a heavy eater and enjoyed eating his meals alone.

He talked fast and had no patience for those whom he judged less wise. Although he was very cunning, he also was humorous. People would laugh at his jokes showing even the last tooth

Kibiwot was a practical joker and looked for half-witted fellows to make fools of them. One day he was fortunate to find a young fool. Kibiwot stared at him for a long time and finally observed, "I heard that you are so lazy that even a day old calf can run and jump faster than you can. I don't really see why you were born and how you happen to be found in men's company. "But I am strong," the young man protested. "Are you, really?" Kibiwot teased, "I doubt if you can even jump over this pool of water. Do it, and I will believe that you are really a man. And if you cannot do it, then your mother must be a *Koro-go*."²

The half-witted fellow took the word *Koro-go* as an insult to his mother and decided to prove that he was a man, after all. As he run forcefully to jump over that pool of water frequented by wild pigs, he tripped and landed squarely in the smelly slime.

The rest laughed uncontrollably seeing the young fellow totally submerged in a gluey substance. He was so much smeared that none could recognize him. He could neither see nor breath as both his eyes and nostrils were totally blocked. In the process, he had swallowed the smelly mixture as he tried to breath through his open mouth.

The rest laughed and one or two vomited as they watched the young man struggling to emerge out of the pool like a wild pig, having had this unusual bath.

Later, when he complained, he was told, "Your mother after all *is* a woman and there was no need to prove it!"

²Woman [Literally: One in charge of a home]

“My family for a long time has been regarded poor and it’s time I made them rich,” commented Kibiwot. He was eager to build a new image for his humble folks who were referred to as nobodies. We recalled what had happened some time ago when his father had stood to speak at an elders’ meeting. Some wealthy elder silenced him by saying, “Even you, father of Kibiwot! What have *you* got to tell us?”

That was an insult not only to the family but to the whole clan. Kibiwot was so much embarrassed that he almost threw a spear at his father’s opponent in the meeting. It was only when the elders reprimanded the opponent that Kibiwot’s anger was softened. Silently, he planted his spear back, firmly into the ground.

“Even if it means raiding the *Kamoriongo*³ alone, I will do so. I don’t care if you people remain cowards for ever.” Kibiwot was known for his courage. He had once killed a lion that had destroyed much of the tribal livestock.

“We cannot allow ourselves to be boys and yet we are men. We cannot remain subordinates in tribal affairs,” Kipsugut said fiercely. “We must be seen as men and not as boys or women. If I faced the circumciser at dawn, do I need to fear anything? As Kibiwott has said, we must do something sensible.” He scrutinized our faces. We remembered a time when Kibiwot had threatened the circumciser with death.

He had gone to consult him on the day of circumcision, but the old man could not be rushed.

He wanted to take his own time. It was on the second visit that the old man declared, without hesitation, that he could not be

³Maasai lands

forced to do what he was not prepared for. He added, "If you are in a hurry, then you should circumcise yourself."

Kipsugut promptly drew his sword, ready to use it. The old circumciser realised whom he was talking to. So with Kipsugut we went through the circumcision exercise and later through various rituals that ushered us to manhood.

Before the circumcision ceremony, I was faced with a situation that I will remember as long as I live. In our family, there was a lad, almost of my age, who had grown up with me. I thought the boy was my brother or cousin as nobody had bothered to tell us.

I only learnt who the boy was as the circumcision day approached. My father sent him and me to visit his family with the message about circumcision. We left early in the morning, in a company of warriors, and were there in the afternoon. On arrival we found nobody at the homestead. As we were still waiting, a heavy downpour came, forcing us to enter one of the houses for shelter. While we were seated there, a huge snake entered the house, possibly also in need of shelter. Since we were armed we attacked the reptile using spears and soon it was dead. We threw it outside while congratulating ourselves.

As the rain subsided, the owner of the house arrived. I later learnt that he was my friend's father. After the usual greetings and the news of our journey since we left home in the morning, he was silent for a long time as if something serious was troubling him. Soon we learnt what it was.

"Boys, when did you arrive here? Was it before or after the rains?" he asked.

We replied, "Before."

In bewilderment he asked, “ Did you see anything unusual here?”

We told him excitedly, “Yes. An enormous snake came in, but we killed and threw it away.” We thought we had done something good to save the lives of the occupants, but alas!

The old man looked at us as if he had swallowed a live beehive. He later wailed as if a dear one had passed away.

For a long time, we did not know what was wrong as the old man kept on referring to the demise of his livestock as well as his family. We had never heard of people keeping snakes as pets, much less for protection and prosperity.

Drawing his sword, he threatened to slay us if we did not disappear from his homestead for good. To his son he promised instant death if ever he would step into his compound again.

We scampered away and later spent the night in the neighbourhood. The old man was never to learn of our mission.

The next day we learnt the old man gave his god an honourable burial. Early the next morning he and his wife left with flour and malt and leading a goat. Their mission was to get another snake from the other snake-keepers. My friend never went home again until he died at a ripe old age some years ago. In families, like this old man's, a visitor was never entertained near an area housing the serpent, but in one of the other houses unless the visitor was also a snake-keeper.

The snake rested next to the house, in a bush mainly of stinging nettle. When one of the family's sons got married, a day was set to introduce the bride to the family's protector. The young lady was

counseled about the usefulness of the snake and how it was to be kept.

Anyway, we returned home to attend our circumcision ceremony.

4

Circumcision ceremonies were never rushed about. Many procedures had to be observed. Circumcision ushered the initiates into a new age-set. The inauguration of a new age set meant change of leadership in the land. The age-set of *Kipkoimet* were in leadership then and therefore led in almost everything in relation to security, cattle raids and even marriage. The junior age-set could not be allowed to undergo circumcision rituals as that could jeopardize leadership in the land.

It was wrong for an uncircumcised boy to seduce a girl as all girls belonged to the age-set that was in power. If an uncircumcised boy ever tried to seduce a girl, he would be beaten as part of his punishment.

The uncircumcised could not even participate in killing animals and were not allowed to participate in cattle raids as they were seen as children. The people believed that any violation of the taboo by the uncircumcised would bring a curse on the whole community.

That is why we, boys, even though we were now grown up with full beards, were never recognised. This had happened because when our turn came the circumcision exercise had been temporarily closed for a period of eight years. This has been done after the circumcision period of the *Kipkoimet*, who were the sons of the *Chumo* age-set. Therefore, our age-sets of *Kaplelach*, the sons of *Sawe*, were left without circumcision. We were greatly frustrated.

The time was ripe for us to assume the tribal leadership. This would mean opposition by the *Kipkoimet* age-set who were in power then. We were desperate for recognition. So we prepared ourselves for circumcision, secretly, by collecting food stock of millet and milk in gourds. This was meant to sustain us during our seclusion period following the circumcision. Unfortunately, the leaders discovered our plan and frustrated it as they drank the milk and forcibly took away our reserved food. They chased us away whenever they saw us. However, we did not lose hope. We became even more determined than before to carry out our plan, which was to visit the circumciser and induce him, with secret gifts, to do the job.

As our secret plan progressed, the elders watched us with perplexity. They knew that a new age-set was ready to topple the old leadership. We had already rejected being beaten by our seniors, an act that could cause a full-scale war. We moved in groups for security reasons, and at times would even retrieve our girlfriends forcefully from our immediate seniors.

The elders knew that we were dead serious. They had to take an appropriate decision to avert bloodshed. They gave us their blessings to prepare ourselves adequately for circumcision by collecting food and other requirements. We did this discreetly and stored everything in an elder's home.

After the elders were satisfied with our stores, they set a day for interviewing us. Meanwhile, the current leadership of *Kipkoimet* age-set had come to know of these developments. They were distressed knowing that soon they would be powerless.

In that evening there was a ceremony of prayers and blessings in preparation of the handing over of the power and leadership from the age-set of *Kipkoimet* to that of ours.

Early in the morning, at sunrise, all people assembled outside the home of Telenges, the tribal Patriarch, where leaders of the *Kipkoimet* age-set had kept all the communal weapons. Between the two parties—we and our retiring counterparts—were elders. Those who were retiring were sobbing and whimpering, as they would lose their leadership position to us. The atmosphere was uneasy. Anything could happen. That is why the elders had to be in between us. The elders and the retirees seemed to be struggling with serious questions. Will the incoming leadership be in total control of security? Will it help in increasing prosperity in the land? As we stood, we faced the East, while the predecessors faced the West.

Already before us, the successors, were two leaders from every *Pororiet*.⁴

An elder asked us in a loud voice, “Are you ready to assume the leadership of the land?”

“Yes.” We replied together. “We are ready to own the land, the elders, the women and the children.” This promise meant that we were ready to provide security and prosperity for them all irrespective of their age or sex.

After this interview, the elders prayed to Asis to bless us, to equip us morally, and to protect us so that we may strengthen the security of the land.

From then onwards the elders warned the outgoing age-set against harassing us anymore. Although we were still uncircumcised, we were worthy of respect.

⁴A tribal division comprising several clans living in one place

Then, the *Kiptoru*⁵ of the *Kipkoimet* age-set presented us with *Songolik*,⁶ shields, and spears, as the power moved to our age-set. A new *Samburto*⁷ was found at a blameless homestead. Women and children were kept out of this auspicious location.

We were now ready to fight for our rights—leadership, marriage, owning property and providing security in the land. Therefore, we were armed to the teeth, with spears and swords. We were ready for anything.

Immediately we got prepared for the circumcision rites, which would usher us into the manhood status.

5

Two days before the actual exercise, many things took place. Guests began to gather at the initiates' homes. Most of them were friends and relatives from far and near. Various preparations were at the final stages as we waited to enter the most revered ancestral world of mystery involving many norms, rituals and other practices.

Preparation for food and drinks for the guests were nearly complete. The most important thing was the beer-preparation. Women could be seen carrying pots of malt out of fermented millet flour mixed with water. The millet had been roasted after fermentation, and then fried.

During this time our *menjet*⁸ was constructed in a bush at some distance. We, the initiates, were shown how to construct the *menjet*,

⁵Junior leaders

⁶Ostrich feathers

⁷Place where weapons were kept

⁸Seclusion Hut

by the experienced hands of the murenik.⁹ Our godfathers led us in this exercise. Women provided the grass for thatching.

A distance away a field was cleared out of bushes to create enough room for songs and dances that were to accompany the rituals.

The Kalenjin community places the highest value on the occasion. Any abuse was out of question. Every activity was carried out to the expectation of the tribal understanding of the circumcision ceremony. Any unbecoming behaviour was seen as a bad omen. We were expected to behave in a mature manner.

The day before the actual ceremony was especially marked for the various activities that were meant to prepare us, the initiates, for the occasion. To begin with, early in the morning we, the initiates, were all shaven at the *Kapkoross*¹⁰ outside the already prepared Gotab *tumdo*.¹¹ The hairs of all the initiates were collected onto an elder's traditional stool and were later mixed with cow dung, then plastered at the foot of that altar. This exercise signified that we were now one, and were going to share everything including food and responsibilities. It bound us all into a status of brotherhood, more than mere friendship.

After that we were led to a river where we took a bath as part of the ceremony. We were also provided with oil to smoothen our bodies.

Early in the afternoon things took a dramatic change as we were led for the *Kaponyony* ceremony that took place in our *menjet*. Only we the initiates and the already circumcised men participated

⁹Elders and warriors

¹⁰Family Altar

¹¹House of Ceremony

in this ceremony. It was a ceremony, which no woman or child could ever witness.

We were garlanded with *the Sinendet*¹² and our hands were adorned with *Korosek*.¹³ Then followed the *Kaponyony*.¹⁴ This was a big occasion. We were now counselled, ahead of the circumcision proceedings. It was a place to prepare us fully to attain the highest courage. There was a charged atmosphere. All warriors and elders were armed with spears, clubs and swords, which showed that the ceremony meant life and death.

The ceremony was marked by an ominous silence. Nobody even sneezed as that could mean bad omens.

All the proceedings were repeated four times, and during the intervals we were led to the cleared field for the *Cheptilet*.¹⁵ During the *Cheptilet* we saw other people, watching us at a distance.

During that period, we the candidates, had been set apart. There was no more intermingling between us and children. By “children” was meant the uncircumcised ones. Even an old man remained a “child” if he was uncircumcised.

As the *Cheptilet* dance began, all men formed a ring. Led by a senior godparent, we, the initiates, had formed an inner circle within the ring. At the centre were four men holding a rectangular shield, while hitting it in unison at intervals to the rhythm of the song. In this manner we danced gracefully, though nervously, as we would go round the centre. Spears and swords could be seen rising together in arches as warriors sang the song. It was a wild dance taking place on that lethal ground.

¹²Sacred climbing plant

¹³Another sacred plant

¹⁴An introductory ceremony of what was to happen the next day

¹⁵Songs and dances

Mothers and the rest kept away from that mysterious ground occupied by the well-charged warriors. The women were overwhelmed with fear and mystery. They felt sympathy for their sons. They could be heard sobbing and crying for what was going to happen to us. Some women even fainted as they threw themselves to the ground with their bosoms heaving painfully.

Danger was looming large and we were treading on dangerous ground. Any sign of fear could lead to instant death. The security was very tight. We, the candidates, had been revealed the secrets of circumcision that could make us to flee for our own lives. It had happened before.

It was known that cowards in the past had been speared to death by their next of kin. Who could live with cowards anyway? The security and prosperity of the land depended on courageous people. Cowards could not make leaders and therefore it was in order for them to die at that particular moment.

The mothers knew that if their sons showed any cowardice they would be killed instantly. The song *Kenu koomet korire*¹⁶ was sung powerfully to drown the mothers' wailing. It was meant to convey a message to us that our mothers' fears were baseless after all, as they were expected to know nothing pertaining to male circumcision rites. We were warned against paying any attention to our mothers' wailing.

In between were prayers and blessings for our protection and courage, as we knelt down. We were counselled that a coward during the process was a curse to the whole community. Those who misbehaved could neither marry nor participate in any communal ceremony. In our society, such people if allowed to live, formed the hopeless and useless group *Sorik* who commanded no respect at

¹⁶The song meant, "In crying, my mother was cheating [herself]."

all. Such people served at unworthy missions that could not be performed by respected men. We were heavily warned against any misbehaviour, especially any cowardice.

We had been sworn to total secrecy. The ritual and other practices were closed with curses. Any person who missed the mark was later thrown into a state of mental abnormality that was greatly feared by all.

As the day waned, the initial ceremonies came to an end. Later in the evening other songs and dances followed. During this time, an obscene language freely flowed in all conversation. It was as if a satanic power was at reign. Young men could be heard talking of sexual matters in carefree abandon, without caring who was there. The whole exercise was meant to cleanse us. All evil thoughts were washed away through the public declarations. It was a way of creating a new spiritual attitude that was to guide us during our circumcision and seclusion period.

Just before midnight, we the initiates were smeared with oil on our faces and legs by women and children. This act was meant to prepare us for further hardship that were to follow that night and at dawn early next day. This was especially an opportunity for women to send us off with their blessings. They also provided us with ornaments to wear. Perhaps the items were meant to remind us of their presence during the sufferings that were soon to follow.

Before we departed for the House of Ceremony, for many painful rituals, prayers were offered to Asis (God) to protect and bless us during and after the circumcision exercise that was to take place at dawn. Also our departed ancestors were called upon to stand by us during the course of that period.

Later, we entered the House of Ceremony in order of seniority, according to the age-sets of our fathers led by the senior godfather. We had been shown outside what was anticipated inside the house. The house was silent as a wall although it was packed with people. What happened in that house and the rituals in which we participated, is beyond description. This is something that no circumcised man or woman is ever permitted to talk about, for it will bring about a great curse.

6

By morning we felt as if we had been created anew and were now prepared for the promotion to adulthood through fire. After it, we would enter a new phase of preparation in discipline through many teachings, rituals and practices in our seclusion hut. It was never a simple period. During this period the elders taught us many things. First, we were told to repent of all our sins. We were being prepared for adulthood status, free from childhood experiences. Failure to do so meant that bad omens would follow the offender bringing him barrenness and other mental illnesses. We were to repent of any sexual knowledge, theft, murder (in case we had committed any), and other unbecoming behaviour. So there before us was a spiritual preparation, which was meant to guide us beyond the circumcision and the seclusion period, throughout the rest of our lives.

During that time we learnt the tribal customs and norms through many teachings, songs and practical lessons. These we had to observe through various steps in preparation for manhood. The real circumcision rituals are kept so secret that even a mentally disturbed person cannot dream of mentioning them. They were closed with a curse. Whoever broke this taboo was re-circumcised and became a symbol of tribal disgrace.

Thus the exercise during our seclusion period following circumcision was very demanding and exacting. For one whole year we lived in the forest learning how to co-exist with our environment including wild animals. We learnt their behaviour, how to track them, how to approach them, how to lay traps for them and how to identify them through their scent.

We learnt how to make use of bows, arrows, spears and shields especially in preparation for cattle raids and wars. We also learnt the rules governing the wars. In our community, circumcision rituals and teaching could not be taken lightly. Failure to observe them meant death. We were taught many important things during our seclusion period.

We were taught that it was *Kigirei*¹⁷ for a man to marry his age mate's daughter let alone sleep with her. The girl was more of his daughter just like his own. In case such a thing happened, the offender was subject to the women's cleansing ceremony called *injoget*. I will tell you more about this ritual later in my story.

During this ceremony the women sang: "*Angochame kosiebe ama len lakwa*."¹⁸ We were told that such a man was a symbol of disgrace for the rest of his life. Nobody could accept to bear such a stigma and therefore, men kept away from such immoral excesses. Unfortunately, these days no one cares about these things. Now, men sleep with not only their age-mates' daughters but even with their own daughters, from their own drops. It pains my soul to hear that somebody has impregnated his own daughter and yet nothing is done to him.

Another thing we were taught was to abstain completely from sleeping with an age-mate's wife. In case such a thing happened,

¹⁷Wrong

¹⁸Why sleep on top of her without recognizing her as a child

the offender was severely beaten by his age mates. To make it worse, it was announced all over never to allow such a man to sleep in any home during his visits. In most cases he was made to sleep in stores.

We were counselled against any sexual activity outside marriage, even with widows. We were told that our *toloek*¹⁹ was for our own families' procreation and we should never give out any of it to anybody else. We were made to understand that a person failing to observe it was to blame himself later in life. He would end up begetting weaklings both physically and mentally or only girls because he had already wasted the good seed that could produce boys, earlier in life. This curtailed any sexual relationship between young unmarried men and women.

It was a taboo for a young man to have any sexual relationship with an uncle's wife or any other old woman. Such an offender was cursed completely from the tribal face. In most cases, the offender received mob-justice that led to instant death. These days, young men go on a drinking spree with not only their mothers' age-mates but even with their own mothers and aunts. Before Asis that is already a curse, and such cases have been known. Recently, I heard that another woman committed suicide after learning that for the whole night she had sexual knowledge with her own son.

It was abominable for one to have sex with an animal. A person found doing such a thing with a cow, a sheep or a goat was surely put to death through mob justice. Nowadays men can even become lover of corpses, something that even wild animal could not think of doing.

¹⁹The first seed

We were taught that it was wrong for a man to enter into his father's other wife even if she happened to be young. She was seen and respected as a mother. The offender was cursed.

We were taught that we should avoid not only sleeping with the prohibited women, but even coming close to them.

Our two *motirenik*²⁰ were people with the most impeccable credentials and were blameless. Accordingly, those people were highly valued. They had the most engaging personalities that good people could have. They had goodness, decency and respectability.

Their moral standing was much valued and we were very privileged to be entrusted to them for that whole year. For the whole of that period we lived in our *menjet*.²¹ Our godfathers were well versed in tribal wisdom that flowed throughout the course of our seclusion period. These days young men, whose morals are questionable, act as godfathers during the said periods. Quite a good number of them are drunkards who have nothing to offer as examples, let alone teaching. These young godfathers at the end of the day teach nothing but fornication, drunkenness and indiscipline. Moreover, all of them are total failures in the society. In most cases they pretend to know what they do not know.

But our godfathers taught us that drunkenness was totally abhorred as it was seen as the mother of all evils. Even elders were highly reprimanded if found to be staggering home from communal social beer parties, which were anyway reserved for the aged. It was a taboo for young men to drink or taste beer. Young men were regarded the tribe's greatest assets in terms of production and security and therefore defaulters were beaten thoroughly. Beer, as we were

²⁰Godfathers

²¹A secluded hut in the forest, especially for boys' preparation into the manhood status

taught, does not make a man happy, courageous or intelligent but only intoxicates him making him incapable of controlling himself both in body and soul. According to our godfathers, a person drinking to forget his troubles was just escaping since beer could not solve his problems. Others drink for social elevation and in the process build castles in the air. We were taught to meet our challenges squarely as sober men and come up with clear and permanent solutions.

We were taught so many other things. For example, we were taught that it was wrong to separate our fighting parents. In case we were to come across such a deed, we were to inform their age-mates. One of the main reasons for this was that one could find one's mother pinned down to the ground with her legs wide apart. It was an abomination to see her private parts, even her thighs. Also the father might find that son was defending the mother, and would curse him.

We were taught to show maturity by respecting all people irrespective of their sexes and age.

We were taught that according to our custom, a woman was married to a kinship if not the whole clan, though she belonged to one male member. She was the property of the kinship and the clan as long as she lived, even if her husband died pre-maturely. She could raise children through one of the immediate close male members, a cousin or an elder brother of the deceased. The children belonged to the deceased and above all she would inherit her late husband's estate just like any other son of that family. Marriages in those days were not like nowadays. There was no living together of men and women outside marriage as is so common now. That is why divorce was not so common in our times as it is now. During our time, the process of divorce could last even for a period of over ten years with attempts at counselling and reconciliation continuing meanwhile. It was only after every attempt at reconciliation had

failed that divorce was allowed, and that too after counselling the couple one last time against the option of divorce.

How did a husband and wife divorce one another in those days? First, they shook hands, followed by childhood greetings and names. A man would say *Takwenya Chebet*, and the woman would respond *Supai Kiptum*. These names were never mentioned during their marital lifetime. The two then faced opposite directions and, holding the *Lol*,²² pronounced, "If ever I come back to you may this soil consume me." Then they tore the *Lol*. This act was known as *Kebet lol*. Without looking behind the two walked towards their respective directions. They were not to meet again that particular day.

I tearfully think of all the immoral things that happen in our times, as I lay at my deathbed. What has the world come to?

Recently, a young man murdered his father while pursuing inheritance. The old man had cursed whoever would in any way torture him. After the death of his father, the young man never lived long to inherit him. He followed his father to the grave, just as the old man had said.

So we were taught all these things during our seclusion period.

I can never forget those days. I remember how my friend Kipsugut faced a lion alone during our seclusion period. He had gone to inspect a new trap not far from our *menjet*, when he came face to face with a male lion. He was armed.

To begin with, the wild cat was enjoying some juicy meat from an animal earlier trapped in our friend's snare. For the lion, eating a small gazelle was just breakfast. It roared to intimidate the intruder.

²²A small pouch containing soil

But our friend could not be swayed and was prepared to teach the thief a lesson.

A confrontation followed. He aimed his club at the head of the jungle-king but instead got its chest. That made the big cat to think that already a war had been declared and was not ready to accept defeat.

Leaving its half-eaten breakfast it made a ferocious move towards Kipsugut for a major showdown. Calling upon the ancestral might, Kipsugut poised his spear and aimed at his assailant that had leaped into the air. The spear caught it, but not at a vital position thus making it much madder than before. As the lion prepared for its major kill, Kipsugut thrust a short stick sharpened at both ends into the snarling mouth of the beast. That rendered the king of the jungle powerless. Kipsugut unsheathed his sword and slashed the lion to death. But that was not before he was severely clawed on his face and chest. A lot of blood was gushing from the affected areas.

Though in great pain and fatigue, our friend had enough strength to raise a victorious war cry that awoke us from our morning slumber.

On arrival we assisted him to the *menjet*.

Though he had emerged as a hero, he was later reprimanded by the elders for having left the *menjet* alone. It was very wrong to venture outside in that manner.

Anyway, Kipsugut wore the lion's skin during the coming out ceremony, as a sign of courage. It took him a long time to recuperate fully while we fed him with milk mixed with blood and a lot of soup mixed with herbal medicine.

Thus during our seclusion period, we had to endure hardships and in most cases beaten frequently by the junior warriors. We were threatened in many ways. We were called names and at times made to do the impossible things, and if we failed, received further beatings. That was part of our training in preparation for manhood.

We were made to understand that owning cattle through cattle raiding was the only source of recognition. I remember that these teachings were implanted into our minds during our tender ages. As young boys we played with *Lapotik*,²³ which we called “cattle.” Boys from other ridges could spy on them and later did a “raiding” exercise. After a successful operation, the winners could perform a mock *Kambakta*²⁴ to embarrass the irresponsible losers. A retaliation exercise could then be executed to retrieve back the “cattle”.

On some occasions a mock fight would occur while grabbing the most valued assets. It was during those raids that courageous leaders were identified at our tender ages who would later become our *Kiptainik*²⁵ even in times of war. Through this method I was selected as a leader of my own age-set.

Finally, we were relieved from our outpost responsibilities by another group of young men. As we were going back home, we were full of silence as each one of us contemplated on what we were to do to improve our welfare.

“*Murenju*,²⁶ I said, “We must now think seriously on what to do. Our forefathers undertook various cattle-raids and were very successful and that is why we have all these herds around. Had

²³Sodom apples

²⁴A victory dance

²⁵Leaders

²⁶Fellow men

they been cowards our society could be a like a mass of beggars. I strongly believe that we must also follow their example.”

Before we reached home four days later we had come to realize that in a cattle-raid, preparation was very important. Not acquiring cattle through raids meant that there would neither be marriage for us, nor prestige, two things which we were not ready to forfeit.

A couple of days after our arrival at home we consulted senior warriors on how to carry out a successful raid. That took place after we had made a report on our previous responsibility. The tribal elders received the news with keenness. The meeting approved that a good number of security men be deployed to all out-posts so as to check the movements of the *Kamoriongek*²⁷ who were out spying on us.

For several days we had various meetings involving *Kiptainik*²⁸ from our clan Kapchepkendi and those of Kaptalam. Finally, we involved many warriors from both sides. We soon found that we had a common problem that needed urgent attention.

7

The meeting started. I stood and said, “We have at long last decided to meet since we have one common problem. We must have cattle of our own. Our elders have a saying, “*Ngiomechi poton kelok*”²⁹ and now the time has come when we should do so. Today almost all of us have no livestock of our own.

²⁷The Maasai

²⁸Leaders

²⁹Let us put our trembling leg together; and one [leg] will get support from the other.

“Although some of our fathers do have some cattle, there is a saying, *“Memene che kimene Cheptol.”*³⁰ A story goes that the people of Cheptol slaughtered and ate their cattle in anticipation of a successful cattle raid and thus owning a larger herd of animals. They were defeated and later returned to their empty Kraals. Anything can happen to the herds at home though we don’t anticipate the worst. So in brief we have nothing to boast of. Some of us are of the opinion that we must organize a war against our neighbouring tribes. The result will enable us to be seen as men. We have called you to get your opinions.” I concluded and sat down.

A leader from Kaptalam clan rose and said *“Murenju*, what our *Kiptaiyat*³¹ has said, is of great significant to our age-set of Kaplelach. We don’t own cattle because there has not been any organized war since the Kavirondo disaster. We still remember that our country lost over five hundred men. But then there is a saying, *“Ma-amei ilat ket oeng.”*³² He concluded.

Somebody said, “We must go for a raid. What we need to do is to have a working plan. We need to know where cattle are, and that is not possible unless we have spies to do this job on our behalf. Our fathers have told us that it is unwise to venture on a blank mission. We should identify the tribes we believe have cattle and then have good people to spy on them.

“And if there is anybody who is not for us he should leave before we continue further.” Nobody moved. “As far as our ancestors are concerned there are three known possible areas namely: *Tulwab Kony*,³³ *Kamoriongek*,³⁴ and the *Rogos*.³⁵ In

³⁰Do not be puffed up like the people of Cheptol.

³¹Leader

³²Lightening cannot strike the same tree twice.

³³Mount Elgon

³⁴The Maasai

³⁵Kavirondo

this case Kavironondo is out, as a few years ago our elders raided and brought all their animals. That was several years after the disaster. I don't think they have recovered enough. So that leaves us with the *Kamoriongek* and the *Kony*. We cannot follow the Southern Maasai for they are far away from us but their remnants near Mt. Elgon are more appealing. I understand they have a large heard of animals that they had stolen from us. We must bring them back.

“With the *Kony* it is a different story altogether. One warrior stood up and told the story of the *Kony*.

8

Kingo the ancestral father of the present Kalenjin people lived around Mt. Elgon. He was married to Tamunai, the daughter of Sengwer (Cherangany). At one time a severe drought came which rendered the whole land completely bare. Most of the animals died including the herds of Kingo. Luckily, one cow survived.

“One day Kingo their father, had before him a little milk mixed with blood in a calabash, which could not even support him alone. He was disturbed and dismayed by its scarcity and was wondering how he was to share the little liquid between him and the immediate survivors who were already malnourished. Already he was sensing a rebellion as the sons had raised the issue of slaughtering the only cow to feed the dying family. He watched with a lot of perplexity how famine had reduced babies, Pregnant and breastfeeding mothers to bony figures awaiting a slow death.

“While Kingo was disarrayed in his soul, his sons descended upon him, each demanding a share in the milk for

their families' survival. There was a bitter quarrel between sons and father.

One son, known for his arrogance, came forward and said, "Our children cannot perish of hunger; and yet there is a cow that could feed them." He spat loudly.

"I have said it repeatedly that we must slaughter the cow to save our families," he continued.

"Yes, that's the only way to survive as its milk cannot feed even an infant." Some of the sons and their wives supported the idea.

Kiptigen, the most humble among them all, said, "Slaughtering that animal cannot solve the problem at all. And, how do you expect our aged father to survive knowing that that is his only remaining animal. If you had been working hard like me, you would be having plenty of honey and wild fruits. But there you are doing nothing apart from your songs and dances."

"What do you mean?" Asked his brother as he advanced towards Kiptigen "Do you think honey is the only food for survival? We need real food for our stomachs."

"But why don't you try?"

"Shut that mouth of yours or you will know who we are. Don't claim to be our leader as if you are the old man yourself."

"If your arrogance is food, why don't you eat it?" Kiptigen also moved forward to show that that he was not a coward. And as the two were moving closer for a showdown, Kingo rebuked them.

“The aged elder was so distressed by this arrogance that in anger he surrendered the gourd containing the milk to his already quarreling sons. With pain he wondered why the sons were quarrelling like this instead of solving the problem of their hunger. According to him they could be hunting as well as collecting wild fruits and honey to help feed their families. He was fed-up with being the main provider and had no desire of sharing the little milk equally among his useless sons.

“As the old man handed out the calabash, a fight broke out. Nobody could accept the other to have the coveted goods. In the process, the gourd was broken into pieces and the precious liquid was spilled on to the thirsty earth. None of the sons got a drop. In desperation the children wailed as their mothers sobbed.

“Though all the sons were responsible for the destruction of the gourd, Kipkeiyo and Noondiin were especially blamed for their unbecoming behaviour. The two men could never agree at all and had divided the clan into two opposite camps that caused the commotion. Kingo had to curse his sons and chase them away from his presence. He was very dismayed for having raised a most undisciplined and rebellious people who had no patience and respect for the aged.

“And as the other sons left the mountain, they bitterly blamed their two errant brethren for causing the original family’s disintegration. Bitterness between the two has persisted to this day, and has caused a lot of wars, suspicion and indignation among them. But blood relationship played a big role in the eventual healing process.

“However, as the other group of sons departed, they promised to be in touch. Kony, the eldest son, remained behind

to take care of his aged parents as he also promised to keep watch on his brothers as they wandered in search of a livelihood. They promised to make fires on high hills to signify their existence. So Kony became "Konyiin" as he had the responsibility of watching for signs of his brothers.

"This made the other brothers envious of Kony. They saw him more blessed as they themselves wandered around in the wilderness, at times almost perishing of hunger and other dangers on the way. They felt that Kony had become rich by unfair means. In bitterness they vowed to have a fair share of their father's wealth through whatever method.

9

"And warriors, we are the children of those brothers of Kony. This is why we must retrieve our rightful share." The warrior ended his long discourse as the rest nodded their heads in agreement.

"Therefore visiting them to reclaim what once belonged to us is not wrong at all. It is our right to retrieve what the Maasai and the Kony stole from us," Kipkesio said.

"We must send out spies, six men from Kaptalam and the same number of men from Kapchepkendi clans." We all agreed to do this.

As one of the leaders of Kaplelach age set from Kapchepkendi clan, I was to accompany the spymasters and among us were Arap Sambai and Kipsongol, the junior elders. My close friends Kibiwott and Kipsugut were also picked because of various qualities they had shown. Arap Sambai and Kipsongol were given the responsibility of leading the raid.

Meanwhile, a group of elders were enjoying an afternoon drink of traditional beer in the home of Arap Kerich. As they enjoyed their beer, they discussed various issues of importance touching on the life of the Nandi land. Most important was the news brought from *tokwek*³⁶ .

“It appears as if those *Kamoriongek* are still after us. Perhaps they have forgotten the latest war we had with them at what we call now *Chemuswo*³⁷. We massacred so many of them that blood flowed like water. But then we were “men” unlike the current generation,” an elder observed.

Telenges said, “As I was telling you, elders, our young men need to be awakened to meet the challenges before them. The security of the land is of great importance. Here are the Maasai spying on us, and we don’t know what they have in store for us. Supposing war broke out today, do we have good energetic and courageous people to defend us? I hate being ridiculed in my old age.” He tapped his snuff pouch as he shook his head making his earring to dance.

After a long silence an elder said, “War will ever be there and so are warriors to fight. We have sired men, not women.”

“Our major worry is not that we do not have men. Do these boys really know their responsibilities? I doubt it,” an elder added. “Are they equipped for war and all that it means? They carry spears as if they are merely sticks. I doubt whether they still know how to use them. They don’t go far from our homesteads and already some of them have bad reputations.”

³⁶Outposts

³⁷A place littered with dead bodies

“Our sons appear to have deviated from the norms as handed over by our ancestors. Just imagine what Kiptesot did the other day,” contributed Arap Talam.

The elders shook their heads in abhorrence as they recalled Kiptesot’s shameful deed.

10

Kiptesot had insulted not only the men-folk but the ancestral wisdom as well. He raped somebody’s wife and, worse, even injured the poor woman, leading her to a miscarriage. It was already a taboo for a man to rape a woman. Causing a miscarriage was even more grievous. Kiptesot had thus ashamed his clan by committing such an immoral act. Her husband was somehow constrained not to combat the rapist as he could have killed him leading to a bigger abomination. But the tribal custom was followed to discipline him and also to cleanse the land from this evil.

Kiptesot was told that he should either take the tribal curse, or face the wrath of women in injoget.³⁸ He accepted the latter.

When I look back to how Kiptesot went through that awesome cleansing ceremony, I shudder. How wonderful was our ancestors’ wisdom! If only we could use such cleansing ceremonies today, so many young men of this generation would be deterred from sexual immorality.

On the eve of the ceremony, the women went wild. They no longer remained the familiar wives or mothers. They were totally different now. Men could not dare to go near them. A feminine unity had been forged to check the masculine aggression.

³⁸A ritual of retribution and cleansing carried out by women against men who had violated women.

Early in the morning the women including the culprit's mother, approached the family's homestead where men had disappeared leaving only Kiptesot and a bullock tethered to a tree nearby. The women had one feature in common. They were stark naked! They were carrying machetes and sharp sticks. On arrival they pounced on him and relieved him of his garments leaving him as naked as they themselves were. Then he was led to the wilderness with the bullock. In the course of the journey he was called names. He was also pushed, kicked, pinched and tripped.

While the elders recalled this story, Arap Kerich could not control his laughter as he pictured a naked young man amidst equally naked women.

Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ho! Ho! Ho! Ho! What did he think he was? A he goat? Or a cock? The boy actually saw real fire in the women's naked bodies, including his mother's. You see, the women showed him everything generously. I wonder whether he will eat meat again in his lifetime."

Arap Kerich was a humorous old man. His squint eyes were in a mischievous dance. He could give an elaborate description of any event.

Rubbing his tearful eyes he added, "I tend to believe that his hoe will never function again. I am told that it looked shrivelled, like a dead dog's. You see, at first he was trying to conceal his limp thing, but then the women asked him why he was being such a miser. Some women pulled at it to attain its rightful length.

The elders laughed uncontrollably. Some were rolling on the hard ground while others were coughing tearfully having been chocked on the beer.

An elder added more wood to the already burning fire. “You mean it was so small and dull in that free field?”

“What else did you expect it to behave like after all that treatment? I bet he will never marry in his lifetime as what he saw will haunt him forever,” another added. “Or perhaps he will go blind having seen other people’s gardens.” Arap Kerich added with laughter.

The elders continued to recall the story of Kiptesot.

The angry women spat on him, slapped him and punched him. They pulled hard at his weapons of procreation as if they wanted to pluck them off. It was actually a rite meant to humiliate somebody to the lowest level imaginable.

During the process the bullock was thoroughly tortured. One could only wonder and shed tears for what the poor animal could have done. Though the Kalenjin people love their herds so much as to give their life for them, this was the only known occasion where such an act was allowed.

The unfortunate animal was slashed with machetes, stabbed with sharp pointed sticks, maimed and flogged as if the animal was the defaulter. In the end, the exhausted animal, now bleeding profusely, collapsed and died. What a great torture! Was it necessary? In his torture the animal had taken the place of the sinful man.

The carcass of the slain animal was cut haphazardly without skinning it. The meat was roasted and only those who had participated in the ceremony, partook of it. The unconsumed parts were burnt or left to the hyenas, who in one way or another were said to be in close communion with the spirits' world; possibly to carry a message to the ancestral spirits.

Later, they proceeded to a nearby river, where they all bathed. Kiptesot received generous help from the mothers as they scrubbed his back for him as though he was a child. This was to remind him of his childish act. There was a jovial mood now. Peals of laughter could be heard in testimony that peace and acceptance had been restored.

From the river they stood facing the East where they were all sprayed by elders with milk and beer for cleansing purposes. They were given fats to smoothen their bodies. After being bathed, Kiptesot was helped as if he was a small baby.

A prayer ceremony followed and Asis was besought humbly to forgive the land. The ancestors were asked to protect the land. Finally, the ceremony came to an end.

The mothers were satisfied that they had accomplished their mission. So they were happy. But Kiptesot still had a tough assignment ahead of him.

The young men, his age-mates, were gnashing their teeth at him as he had disgraced them. On his way home, they received him with appropriate slaps, punches and kicks, and left him for half-dead.

The punishment that Kiptesot had received also went to those who raped little girls, aunts or even grandmothers. Also it was given to those who used any inducement to obtain such favours from the

daughters of their age-mates, or even their own girlfriends. Also it was extended to fathers who may have beaten their grown-up daughters. It was wrong for a father to beat his daughter after attaining puberty. The argument was: why draw her blood who already menstruates. Only her mother could punish her in that stage.

Nowadays, as I hear of grandfathers raping girls their granddaughters' age, or even their own granddaughters, I feel that the modern generation is cursed beyond redemption.

Today I hear of older women who seduce young men or even boys into sexual immorality. This was never known in the history of our tribe. Such women would be beaten by others and possibly re-circumcised.

12

Also long ago, there was this case of Kipsum who deflowered a young girl and made her pregnant. Nothing was known immediately. During her circumcision the truth was known. The young man was disciplined according to the tribal custom. The girl was a disgrace to her kinsmen and the society as a whole. She was allowed to nurture her pregnancy, but without her knowledge an arrangement had been made. It was our custom that children born out of wedlock were thrown out to the hyenas. While in labour, she was led to a bush. As soon as she gave birth to an infant, it was covered with leaves and left alone. Without the young mother's knowledge an old barren woman was already waiting nearby intending to adopt the newborn. In the past things were serious. An infant born out of wedlock was either thrown away to the hyenas alive or suffocated to death, with fresh cow-dung, by both its immoral parents.

The elders were continuing to enjoy their meeting.

“I am just wondering what is coming to our community,” began an elder. “Our sons are too dumb to read and interpret the signs of the times.” He said while spitting out black saliva mixed with tobacco. His beautiful earrings jingled, as if in agreement. He was worried. His eyes were red like embers. He was feared during his time as a courageous leader who had led many successful raids. In his time the tribe was very prosperous with cattle, goats, sheep and healthy women and children. There was peace and prosperity in the land. He could not see any reason why young men could not raise dowry for marriage, even for a single wife, while he himself had six. He had many children and owned many kraals of herds. He shook his head in sorrow causing his earrings to jingle.

“Elders, we must talk like elders to save our community from shame and poverty,” another elder said as he paused to shove a lump of tobacco into his mouth. “What are our departed ancestors saying when they see all these things worsening? I wish I were not alive to see these scoundrels disgracing our ancestral wisdom.

“Elders, if we do not condemn all this, the next generation will hold us responsible for being passive.”

“All what they understand is just women and more women,” added the toothless and half-blind Arap Bwalei.

While tapping his *Kipraut*³⁹ lightly he continued, “These people should be re-circumcised and be taught the tribal values and their meaning.” He inserted the snuff into his nostrils and sneezed loudly as if to signify his contribution.

³⁹A small pouch used by elders to keep their tobacco and snuff

“I suggest that we summon some of their leaders and inquire from them why they are disgracing our ancestral dignity,” concluded one of the elders. Everyone accepted this suggestion as the meeting came to an end late afternoon.

14

A few days later four others and I were summoned to appear before a council of elders in the house of Telenges. We entered and squatted near the entrance. There was total silence amidst a mood of indignation. We were ordered to sit on the hard floor, and for a long time no one spoke. That led to a great deal of anxiety and fear. The aged hands were shaking as if the tired bones were in the process of discarding the already exhausted flesh. That was when I came to realise that something serious was going to happen.

I had no idea what had caused such a tension. But I knew that whatever was the cause meant life and death. We were made to understand that the aged elders had power to dispatch death upon errant members in the society, something that we greatly feared.

After a long and torturing silence, Telenges cleared his throat and spoke, “Boys, what do you want from us? Do you want us to curse you? Why have you failed to behave like normal men? Where is our country heading to?”

For a while nobody spoke for fear of making a mistake that could easily invite the elder’s wrath. In retaliation we also maintained a long silence to create anxiety in the minds of the elders. Silence is a weapon by itself.

Finally, with some effort, I cleared my throat and spoke humbly knowing that a curse was already hanging on our necks. I was torn between supporting the elders wholly and siding with my disloyal

age-mates. However, one thing was clear I could not abdicate my responsibility of defending the age-mates.

I said, “Our fathers, surely we have embarrassed not only you but even our ancestors and Asis by disgracing the tribal customs and so on behalf of my colleagues I beg for mercy. You may be aware that for a long time we have had peace since the time you waged war against the *Kamoriongek*⁴⁰ and chased them away from our land at Ol’Lessos. Also the Kavirondo raid has remained alive in our minds, in which our land lost many able young men. Though we have already done justice to Kavirondo, our earlier failure has already dampened our spirits. But we have not been idle as such, since most of us are engaged in various security responsibilities. A good number of us are stationed at various outposts and have done well. You may remember the latest incident that took place in which our land was saved from being spied on by the enemies. I agree that some of us are idle and have contributed to our disgrace. There is a saying: *Ingeti kimereng minde*.⁴¹ There is not enough discussion these days between you, elders, and us. It is no longer like the olden days when elders were eager and available to impart wisdom. Also we blame ourselves, as some of us no longer attend important gatherings. But then nobody has bothered to find out why.

“You are aware, our elders, that failure to educate our young people every now and then breeds abomination as we witness today. There is a story of a young man, Kipsise, who never attended meetings and so was less informed than were his colleagues. One day it was reported that a frail old woman at the riverbank was seeking favour. The elders had warned the young men never to pay attention to her requests. One day a group of young hunters came across her and Kipsise was among them.

⁴⁰The Maasai

⁴¹The small gazelle causes the big gazelle to get up.

She told the first hunter, "My son, I live across the river and I am too weak to cross on my own, I pray that you carry me over as I am also famished. The leader casually told her, "Somebody after me will carry you. Ask him. So said the rest. Finally, Kipsise came. He was foolish enough to have pity on the frail woman and decide to help her. On reaching the other end the old woman had developed long and sharp claws and sharp fangs. She wanted to eat Kipsise unless he was ready to provide meat for her food. She also refused to come down from Kipsise's back. The poor young man had to carry her to the village. He was told, "You did not want to attend communal meetings and therefore we leave you alone with your tormentor."

"The monster ate Kipsise. So you see, if Kipsise was well informed he could have known what to do as did the rest. I propose that you call us from time to time and teach us our tribal expectations. I thank you."

"As the saying goes: *Chaasei tany ak kobo kelyen ang'wan*,"⁴² added Kipsugut. As an upright and eloquent man, he was determined to bridge the gap between the two parties. He continued, "Today we have learnt that *Ma kiripe pai puch am-am toroi*."⁴³ Caution is only taken after the unexpected has taken place." He continued, "Had we been all vigilant, such misbehaviour could have been checked at their developing stages. However, many things have been done to discipline our errant colleagues, and we can assure you that such things will not be heard again. So far we have posted them to various out-posts where they will be further disciplined. We have learnt a lesson that idleness breeds evil. It is our responsibility now as leaders to make sure that our fellow young men are placed on other productive activities rather than what we have witnessed."

⁴²A cow slips even though it has four legs.

⁴³One cannot guard one's maize field before pigs destroy it.

We informed the old men of our plans to keep ourselves busy doing the right things in which we hoped to receive the elders' blessings. The elders listened attentively and some could be seen nodding their heads as if saying, "now they are talking like men."

The elders accepted our pleas, but only after warning us that if they heard any more complaints, they would punish us severely. We were happy that the elders had promised to assist us in our endeavors.

15

Not far away a group of girls was discussing the men they loved, the impending circumcision ceremonies, their engagements and marriages, as they collected firewood.

They looked beautiful in their traditional attires. They spared no expense when it came to dressing. To begin with, they wore an *osiek*⁴⁴ made of leather strips fastened on a belt decorated with cowries. The *osiek* being too small could barely cover their private parts while the rest of the body was bare.

⁴⁴A short pelvic apron. It consisted of a waist-string from which suspended a short square piece of soft skin providing cover for the private parts in front and leaving the hips bare.

They also wore ornaments consisting of wires and iron chains. They wore *sirimwogik*,⁴⁵ *makiroriot*,⁴⁶ *indonyolit*,⁴⁷ *tapakwet*,⁴⁸ *sonoek*,⁴⁹ and *kipkarkarek*.⁵⁰ In addition, our girls had pierced their ear lobes and had them stretched enormously by wearing *ketik-ab-iit*.⁵¹

We admired the girls. Their bare breasts with beautiful teats made us crazy. Though they were scarcely clothed without even inner pants they preserved their virginity until marriage.

They were so different from the women of today who like to rub their bodies with all kinds of oils as though they were afraid of being black.

So, our girls were busy collecting firewood as they talked.

“My man Sigilai is wonderful,” said Chesondin. “I love him not only because he is handsome but also for his boldness and leadership ability in his age group. He is also responsible and will make a good husband. But I am worried as his family is too poor to raise cattle for dowry. If he is poor, he may not be acceptable during the engagement negotiations.”

She was disturbed by my poverty and feared she might lose me. Her father had been admiring the family of Kimaget who had large herds of cattle. Already a strong friendship between the two families was developing as Chesondin neared the age of marriage. “I really hate him. He is ugly and a known coward who hasn’t killed

⁴⁵Necklaces

⁴⁶Bracelets

⁴⁷Armlets

⁴⁸Leglets

⁴⁹Beads

⁵⁰Anklets

⁵¹Pieces of certain wood

even a jackal. Imagine, of late he has been imposing himself on me as if he has already paid dowry for me. I do not want to become somebody's third wife. Even if it means eloping with Sigilai, I will do so. The other day, this Kimagut reminded me of the impoverished state of my sweetheart's family, which I know already. I really loathe him." She was almost crying as she narrated her sad story.

Of course my girl had a right to be worried. We had known each other from childhood and surely nothing could separate us except death. Nothing could shake her love for me.

"Sigilai Arap Tormoi, my only lover, is too precious to lose," she would talk to herself. And as she thought of me, her face brightened into a secret smile. Day and night, she would think of my slender and tall body, broad shoulders, bright and attractive face with a heavy beard. She would think of my talkativeness and wisdom. "Oh No! He is mine." She would throw her arms forward as if protecting me from being snatched away from her.

"Surely, you cherish him like cold, fresh milk in a calabash." One of the girls teased her into talking more about me. "To us, he is nothing but just another young man around."

"Actually I have more to say of him than you can all think of." She continued as her smiling face shone brightly. "He is swifter than an antelope. "Heh! Heh! Heh! My Sigilai belongs to me, Chesondin, the daughter of Telenges of Kipois clan." She laughed out aloud. "Although he is tall, yet while stalking an animal, he can approach it in the size of a monkey, and in that position he moves silently as a shade and that is the reason why he has never failed to kill his prey."

"But all men are the same anyway." Cheptum tried to pour cold water on the burning fire of Chesondin's excitement."

“Being from the clan of Kipkenda, whose totem are bees, my Sigilai is a man of great courage.”

Chesondin continued to praise my talents. “It was only yesterday that he killed a lion that had mauled his father’s cow. Some of his age-mates had run away on realizing the presence of that huge beast. I understand some even made water while trembling with fright.” She laughed excitedly knowing that this was bad news to some of the girls as their boyfriends were amongst the coward ones. “Please Chesondin, leave us alone. We are now bored with your stories.” Cheptum the proud girl said as she shrugged her shoulders in envy and disgust.

“Let me give you one reason why I love him so madly. Please have patience with me. What I admire most about him are his swift and firm hands. Either throwing a club, or spear, or shooting an arrow, he has never failed to hit the target. With his strength, I am safe and for all this I love him so much. But more than anything else, he is a man of love. He is very kind and understanding, just like his kinsfolk. My family members know that I have a real man who will prove a worthy husband. I promise to offer him all my love, respect and understanding.”

Chesondin was tall and broad-shouldered. She had a broad chest bearing firm breasts. She had a narrow waist, beautiful round hips, and slender lovely legs. Her heavy lips covered milky teeth, and her eyes were alive and sparkling. There was always a smile on her lips.

She was the best woman around who knew how to put life into a song. She also was an excellent dancer.

Chesondin was understanding and sympathetic towards those in suffering. She was a wonderful comforter, crying with those crying and leading the sufferers to come out of their sorrow. She

hated liars and those who in any way caused pain to others. Often she sided with the despised and the guilty only to correct the weaknesses in them.

She would never accept defeat. She knew when to be firm and when to be soft.

Her mind was full of creative ideas that made her the envy of the whole community. She could make a very good teacher among the womenfolk. No one could take her lightly as she had a persuasive tongue.

No wonder when she came of age she was the envy of the whole society as she was as responsible as her father Telenges.

Cheptum retorted, "How can you ever love a poor man? I am thinking seriously of leaving Kibiwott who is also poor like your precious Sigilai. I hate poverty and will never be married by a poor man. He should actually tell me what he is doing now to improve his condition, as my parents will never want to hear of me being fed on vegetables like a goat. I will talk to him frankly tonight. He should know that love alone couldn't support a marriage. No way." Her family had warned her sternly to avoid such a man unless he was ready to acquire cows. Already they had identified a prosperous young man to marry her.

Cheptum was plump and short. Her thighs and feet were short and round. She had full breasts. She walked like a crow on the ground. Her brow was wrinkled caused by self-imposed seriousness. She looked at people with suspicion, and this created more wrinkles on her face. Her teeth were brown.

She had a carefree attitude and thought of herself as the star of the whole division, which was not true.

She walked stiff-necked and with a stoop, her shoulders sagging as if she was carrying an elephant on them.

Her nose was always puckered as if the world around her smelt too badly for her liking.

Her people were rich, and she despised everyone outside her family. She hated her immediate poor neighbours including her suitor Kibiwot. She always dreamt of a rich young man who would come from far to marry her.

Cheptum's two brothers were already old enough to acquire their own wives. How could they marry if their only sister would be married by a poor fellow like Kibiwot!

Only somebody with cattle deserved Cheptum.

"I will be very frank with my man, Kipsugut," Chebet contributed. "He must know my stand very clearly that I am not ready for poverty. If he has no plans of getting herds I will never accept him. His courage alone cannot be chewed as food. I will not stand any embarrassment before my people. He must improve his own standard if his love is genuine. My parents are rich people. Therefore, I must be married into a rich family and not to a beggar who has no idea of improving his condition. My husband must behave like a man and not a woman." She observed as she swayed her graceful hips as a sign of rejecting such a marriage.

To many, Chebet was a simple-minded girl who could not differentiate between her right and left. Her parents were not rich, but she imagined herself to be very wealthy. She was good at copying other people's behaviour. She was a close friend of Cheptum, although she never had steady friends.

She would usually thump her flat bosom the way Cheptum did, and said with her lips curled. "Who does not know that I hate such things"?

People laughed at her in their hearts, but outwardly, they encouraged her to show off her ignorance. "We know that there are no more beautiful girls around here than you and Cheptum are," they would say.

She was not ready at all to suffer from poverty. Even if she would be the tenth wife of a prosperous man, she would generously accept it. Of course in such a marriage, all co-wives would share responsibilities equally, she reasoned.

"Surely we must be considerate in this matter. We cannot forsake our lovers at this time of crisis when they need us more than ever before," Chesondin said. She continued after a pause, "our people say *Kiamei ngui agoi tun keng'etyi ole mi chego*.⁵² I will never leave mine because of poverty. Our love is much stronger than property. Furthermore, he has been faithful to me all these years. He has not abused me in any way. Even my parents and other relatives are aware of our love and therefore it will be unfair to ditch him after so many years of intimacy. I will stand by him to the end even if my relatives change their minds and refuse to recognize our love. I am confident that he will improve his condition soon."

"You may get a prosperous husband, but what if he becomes cruel to you," she tried to convince the rest.

"What do you mean by love?" retorted Cheptum. "If love means poverty then I don't understand it. I cannot accept any love

⁵²We must continue feeding on vegetables till a time when milk is available.

that will lead to poverty. Love must bring happiness and prosperity and nothing else.” She was horrified by what Chesondin was referring to as love.

“I cannot imagine myself in a loveless life. I must know my man in and out”, Chesondin further explored the avenues of love. “Sigilai has all the qualities I wanted in my married life. I cannot accept to be married to a man with other wives because it has never been my idea to share my husband with many other co-wives.”

“What tells you that you will be the only woman in his married life?” Cheptum asked arrogantly.

“He has promised me so.” Chesondin answered.

“What do you understand by promises? As far as I know, promises are made to be broken,” Chebet contributed. “We all know men. They promise you anything when they need your attention. Once they have got what they wanted they change faster than chameleons. Never trust them, my friend. You may regret it later in your life.”

“Let me tell you a story and you will agree with me that love based on material things is useless,” Chesondin held her ground as she related the story of Cherop and Suge.

16

A long time ago there was a girl called Cherop who was very beautiful and was admired by many young men who wanted to marry her. Among her villagers was a very handsome young man called Suge. He did all that was possible to attract her attention and finally he was rewarded.

The young man came from a poor family but that could not deter their relationship. However, her relatives were against their courtship because the man did not have enough property.

One day out of the blue came a very handsome man who boasted of so many kraals of herds that he could not even remember their exact number. Soon he was the admiration of the whole village, especially the relatives of Cherop. Through all methods they persuaded her about the glorious fortunes she would enjoy if she would accept him. Before long she had totally fallen in love with him ditching her childhood lover. Not long after, the young man sought permission to visit his people with the newfound girlfriend in preparation for circumcision, engagement and marriage. His request was granted.

After a day's journey they came to a raised ground far away from human habitation. He pointed ahead as he asked, "Do you see all those white objects over there? The girl said, "Yes." The man continued to tell her that they were his goats and sheep and that the cattle were far away grazing. He asked her to take the shortest route home, as he wanted to see how his herds were faring. The girl agreed.

On arrival she was received and led to a very clean compound and an equally beautiful house. They spent the night with a promise that she would see his parents and other relatives the following day. That night the girl got a rude shock to feel that her lover was hairy with a long tail and had long fingers and toe nails. The morning came, and Cherop found herself face to face with a one-eyed creature with a hoarse voice. He told her to get ready to be his breakfast.

The girl begged of him earnestly to leave her alone for she could serve him as a cook, a herds-girl and anything else

that he fancied, but the monster refused by saying that he had them already.

Finally, the girl offered to be his wife, which the monster accepted. For several years the girl lived with the monster playing all the roles of a wife and during this time the husband brought many human bodies for food. Once, after several days the giant had failed to trap human beings and was dying of hunger. Finally, he remembered his wife at home. On arrival he sliced her breast. He roasted it while promising to consume her in bits. A bird saw what happened and flew to her home with sad news. She reported that their daughter has had her breast roasted. The tribal warriors met and a rescue party was set to leave led by the bird. They found the girl very thin, sick, and too weak; she could neither stand nor walk. The giant was away hunting. On arrival, at dusk he demanded the remaining breast, as he was famished. The warriors emerged from one of the rooms and slew him with their swords and spears.

The girl was brought home at the point of death and for several days was treated but already she was ugly and Suge could not marry her.

“But that girl Cherop was foolish. How could she accept to accompany a foreigner she had never known before”? Cheptum said, “To me, she was a wayward girl.”

“I would rather be the tenth wife of a prosperous man even outside our *pororiet*,⁵³ but he should be somebody known to my people.” Added Chebet.

Chesondin then told another story, that of Kigen and Taplulei.

⁵³A tribal division comprising several clans

There was a man called Kigen and his wife Taplulei. The two had met in one of the tribal dances far away from his home and within no time they had fallen in love. He took the earliest opportunity to elope with her.

Taplulei did not know that Kigen was a cruel person who was totally a miser and worshipped evil spirits. Nobody could be entertained in his house, as visitors were not allowed in his compound. It was rumoured that he was a wizard and that his room was full of all assortment of witchcraft.

For many years the family had been sidelined to an extent that Kigen could never marry from around. He was already in his midlife when he met Taplulei.

The day after they were formerly married, she was shocked to learn that she had married into a very unusual family. To begin with the home was silent as death. Her mother-in-law was worst of all. Her sight alone could throw somebody into insanity as she was very unkempt and never uttered a word to her new daughter in-law; leave alone the usual words of welcome.

The day that followed was the beginning of her sorrowful married life. To begin with she was given a thorough beating by her husband, which was meant to “discipline” her. One of the rooms was solely for her husband and she was never to set foot in it. But she had never been informed of this. So one day she entered that room.

“Who told you to enter that room?” Kigen inquired, full of anger. He spat on the floor angrily. He gazed impassively at the pretty, shaved headed woman standing before him. His face

was flat with snake's eyes darting dangerously at his new bride. It was as if he was seeing her for the first time. His eyes were full of hatred unlike the man she had known briefly.

For a long time Taplulei said nothing. She was totally shattered and horrified by this experience.

"Am I speaking to a stone?" He shouted. She found herself trembling at the new revelation that her love to Kigen was heading to nowhere. They were alone in that small room and none was to witness what actually happened. Kigen's face was full of murder and hatred.

Kigen first tried strangling his wife, then gave her a thunderous slap that shook the house. Taplulei felt her knees melting as she dropped to the ground unconsciously. She had no room even to wail or seek any help. She found herself sinking into a bottomless dark hole full of ghostly sounds. To her it was the end of her world, and her sweet dreams of happiness.

When she came to herself, she saw her tormentor seated smoking his pipe calmly.

For a long time no one spoke.

Taplulei felt certain that she was going to die. She pitied herself for dying so young.

"It is bad that you are still alive," Kigen said after the deathly silence.

He added, "I know that you must be wondering about all this. Let me tell you."

In our family, there are some unique things that you ought to know. We are people set apart, and that is why we live in isolation. So this is the time for your own initiation into our family norms and beliefs. If you fail to conform to our beliefs, you will die.” He whistled and in came a huge snake with its forked tongue darting dangerously. The reptile on seeing a stranger in the room, gave a lot of hissing sounds. It appeared ready to strike.

Taplulei had no energy to rise from her position as she had had her life knocked out of her by Kigen’s vicious slap a short while ago.

As the reptile was about to strike, the man moved forward and patted its head lightly while talking in a language she could not understand. All of a sudden, the reptile coiled itself back into a huge ring with its hood high.

Without another word, the husband left the house leaving the bride and the reptile for further acquaintance. The man was away for a couple of hours, which appeared like many years to the bride. The snake had its eyes set on the visitor who felt like a pigeon.

After what seemed like eternity, the man came back. He was accompanied by his parents. They got seated and, for a long time, none broke the deadly silence.

Finally the aged elder spoke: “Our daughter, welcome. It is good that you have been shown who we are. Our family is unique. Our beliefs differ from the rest of the people around. We keep snakes for protection and prosperity. Our lineage is scattered through many tribes in the world. All of us worship the snake. We worship it as our god. As from today you need

not fear it because already you are one of us through your marriage to our son.

“Your responsibility,” the old man went on, “ is to feed it with fine millet flour, fresh milk and occasionally butter.”

“But remember, there are rules that you must observe seriously until death. You are never to breathe to anybody anything about our protector. If you did that, then even without us knowing, it will revenge through its deadly venom. You are allowed to visit your home occasionally but they are never to visit us. If you are thinking of escaping, our daughter, know that it will mean death for you. Whatever is done to you, you are never to report it to anybody alive.”

After this occasion Taplulei entered into a new phase in life.

She was tortured so much that her total life was a mass of sorrow. She was never to laugh again and neither was she to share her sorrows with any human being. Her husband was as silent as a wall and had nothing except this ghostly house with the precious snake.

She was beaten almost daily and her body was scarred all over. Her beauty disappeared. She grew thin and her face looked sad. She was no longer the star of her people. Her feet were full of cracks. When she went home for a visit, nobody could recognize her.

Her people were only left to shake their heads in dismay. Nobody could ask her to narrate her ordeals as they had later learnt of the family.

After many years, Taplulei could no longer withstand her sufferings. Her courage finally had worn out. She became insane. She was never to know again who she was. Nudity and numbness took control of her whole life. She became a symbol of sorrow. And her story has lived through many generations.

18

Chesondin concluded by telling her friends to be weary of new lovers who may have nothing to offer apart from sorrows. "I don't want to be married to a man whom I have not known for several years."

"Those are your principles, not ours," the rest responded as Chesondin led them in a song:

Kisop lagooncho, eeh!

Kisop lagooncho kitun bik che miach wee!

*Kigochon sangal, eeh! Kigochon sangal, sangal mau chi,
eeh!*⁵⁴

They giggled as they lifted their bundles of firewood onto their heads and proceeded to their homes.

19

Later that night, we joined our sweethearts in the traditional dance. There Chesondin made a solemn promise to me that she would always stand by side whether I was rich or poor. It was disappointing to see that my colleagues' girlfriends were not so sincere as

⁵⁴These girls were blessed! These girls were blessed, for they got married to handsome people! I was given [in marriage] to an ugly man, who doesn't resemble a human being.

Chesondin. They were only after wealth and security, not true love. On our part, we promised the young women that we would bring in wealth without telling them how exactly we meant to do so.

As I had said before, sexual intercourse, no matter how urgently we needed it, was closed with an anathema and nothing could make our girls give in to our demands. They always remembered the song taught to them by their grandmothers:

*Ingekwer chepkosiret koe beek eng tulwetab Arap Borit.*⁵⁵

20

After we had attended the elders' meeting, many things began to happen. Chief among them was the preparation of our spying mission. Though it was purely a warriors' venture, the elders played an important part in it. Soon the elders summoned all the warriors. The main reason was to make a careful selection of the spies. The tribe needed people with courage, patience, wisdom, and cunning. It needed people who could move like ghosts, even among enemy camps, who were swifter than swallows and cleverer than snakes. Also to be identified were senior warriors who had experience of earlier raids.

Finally, two elders, Arap Sambai and Kipsongol, were chosen as senior warriors. The chosen young warriors included Kibiwott, Kipsugut, seven others, and me.

Our preparations began immediately, which involved the procurement of weapons, food and new garments. We were given

⁵⁵Let us beat the squirrel to drink water on the hill of Arap Borit. The song means that just as it is impossible to force a squirrel to drink water on somebody's hill, so also sexual intercourse before marriage is impossible.

all the encouragement and blessings of the tribe. It was going to be a long and difficult journey.

The *maotik*⁵⁶ had been informed and they were busy divining about our journey.

Above all, the elders earnestly prayed for us. The name of the deity Asis known by other names as *Chebopkoiyo*, *Chebonamoni*, and *Cheptalil*⁵⁷ was invoked every now and then to protect us on the way. Our people always believed in the power of prayer.

21

The Kalenjin culture and practices are deeply religious. For the Kalenjin, nothing could be done before invoking the name of God. All ceremonies, for example marriage, and circumcision rituals, were spiritual matters. The ceremonial leaders were supposed to be blameless and upright people. Moreover, in most cases inheritance to various offices played a very big role. For example, *boiyob tum*⁵⁸ and *motirenik*⁵⁹ in circumcision ceremonies and marriages were highly revered for their holiness.

Spiritual leaders, as I have said, had very high moral conduct in the land. We never heard of any spiritual leader having been a murderer, quarrelsome, miser, sexually immoral, thief, witch, and drunkard. The leaders were mature, married people, with upright families. A second wife, a bachelor or unmarried woman, and the

⁵⁶Tribal seers

⁵⁷The Bright One

⁵⁸The Guardian at the Circumcision Ceremony

⁵⁹Godparents

uncircumcised could not perform any ceremony and their houses could not be used for the same.

Every child born in the Kalenjin community belonged to the entire clan, and not merely to his parents or immediate family. That meant that the development of children was the responsibility of the entire community. A mother found mistreating or mishandling her children could be punished by anybody around.

Also for any misbehavior, a child could be disciplined by whoever discovered the act, without any reference to its parents. A child's bad friends were discovered long before they influenced the child's life. A major duty of young boys was to herd the cattle, and therefore they were expected to be near their herds and flocks at all times. Girls were continually watched for virginity by their grandmothers and other respected women. Myths, stories, poems, songs, proverbs, and riddles were used by the elderly to teach the young. Children would gather around the elders at night for their education in a recreating manner.

Boys, prior to their circumcision were thoroughly questioned on whether they had been involved in any sexual act before. A sincere repentance was necessary for a better future life. Those who failed to repent were severely beaten during their seclusion period, if it was discovered that they had lied.

During the seclusion period following the circumcision, an age-set was taught to be concerned about the welfare of its members. If an initiate failed to learn the rules of war, he was isolated from the community. This meant that he could not get married, recruited for cattle raids, or given any position of honor.

An errant young woman was disciplined by her husband as well as other women in the neighborhood. A married woman was

expected to be a responsible woman with the ability to manage her own affairs, her household and life in the community. She had to behave maturely as an adult. A story was told to the girls in their seclusion period of a married woman who had committed adultery. When her evil deed was discovered, she was lured away from home by other senior women. She was taken to a secluded place. There she was questioned, and was confronted with facts. If she still denied her sin, then she was made to swear holding soil on her open hands by saying "If I am cheating, may the soil consume me." By taking such an oath the woman was invoking her own death. On the other hand, if she admitted her sin, she was harshly punished. Her private parts received stings from nettle plants. This punishment was so painful that at the end of it, she could not walk properly for several days. Adultery was seen as a shame to the womenfolk. Therefore severe punishment was necessary for the suppression of such behavior. Drunkenness among women was unheard of.

No one was exempt from our tribal discipline. If an elder was found guilty of practicing witchcraft, rape, murder or robbery, he was clubbed to death. This was done after he had been disowned by the tribe. If you have the patience to continue hearing my story, you will see how Kimnyolei, the Orkoiyot was clubbed to death because he failed to perform his duties.

The life and welfare of the whole society depended on the wisdom of the elderly who were the advisors of the community and were also the custodians of tribal oral laws. They were viewed as leaders with ability to lead others to achieve their goals.

Childbearing was not a couple's private affair. It was their social responsibility. The society took interest in a couple's childbearing activities. A man who sired children rapidly was counseled against it. His wife was to bring forth another baby only when the previous child had grown old enough to run around and

perform minor household chores. While children were regarded as a great blessing from Asis, the society was also concerned that their number did not cause poverty in a home. Therefore couples were encouraged to have the number of children whom they could rear within the available family resources. This ensured that the birth of too many children in a home did not bring about poverty.

Offenders of the tribal norms were in most cases cursed, an effect that threw the defaulter out of the spiritual world. In most cases, the defaulters, after being cursed, became mental patients; some even died.

Theft was a serious offence in our culture.

Once somebody had harvested another man's beehive at night. Nobody witnessed the act. It was only the next day when the devilish deed was discovered. The owner was very surprised and sorrowful as his immediate source of income was the beehive.

For a long time he wondered who could have done it, as such a thing was unheard of. He wondered in dismay how he would feed his family now that his only source of income was gone. He inquired of his sons who also denied any knowledge of the theft.

Many inquiries were made but none offered any information in relation to the incidence since the thief had committed this act all alone. The thief had concealed his movement, and furthermore, he participated fully in the inquiries. No one could tell who had committed this deed.

Finally a meeting involving all men was called. An elder said, “Murenju,⁶⁰ I do not think a beehive could harvest itself and neither can the wind do such a job. It was neither an animal nor a bird as they could neither open nor close the beehive the way we have seen. Whatever did it was a person, otherwise the beehive could have been broken into pieces and scattered all over. This means that one of us has done it.

“We beseech you, young men, to tell us who the culprit is. If you do not tell us what you know, then it means that you are an accomplice to the act and you will bear the consequences. We give you two days to repent. “If we discover the culprit, he will face death. Also, any witness who conceals this act will be cursed.”

Like the rest of the meetings, none owned up to the shameful act.

Two days later, the same people met for further inquiries and to decide the next course of action. They once again counselled the participants, especially the young men, and warned them of the consequences. Everybody appeared innocent like angels.

Even Kibor, the thief, who was present, remained tight-lipped. His face never showed any guilt at all. He took the threats lightly, at times laughing to himself at what was said. He was convinced that nobody had seen him. How could they, he wondered. The night in which he committed the act had been darker than any other night. No one had heard that he had gone out at night without making any noise, though he had shared a house with several young men. His arrival back at the house was also soundless.

⁶⁰Fellow men

“Since you have refused to tell us, we disown you,” an enraged elder said as he sat down. That happened after many consultations.

Nobody talked for a long time. Fear reigned. People knew that somebody was to perish forever, and that a terror had been unleashed.

An aged elder, who was feared most, rose. After observing the faces of the young men for a long time, he said, “The defaulter is in our midst. Yet we don’t know who it is. The beehive alone knows who robbed it at night. Only the hive will identify the person.

The meeting broke unceremoniously as people walked to their homes in silence. Nobody spoke again about it, as none wanted to imagine the terrible curse that was to come.

Soon, the truth was known. And people marvelled, especially the younger generation, of what had happened. They never anticipated such an ugly end to the thief.

Kibor had thought that no one had seen him stealing the honey. But the bees had. For a short while he regarded the threats childish. But the more he tried to forget it, the more the thought of the bees kept coming back tormenting him. Soon his behaviour changed and he found himself in another, mysterious, world. Yes, the bees had seen him stealing their honey! They were coming back for him, to get him ... to punish him. They were swarming all over his body! These were his thoughts now.

He was seen scratching his body as if ants were all over him. Soon he was running stark naked scratching himself and yelling. When we asked what was wrong with him, he would say, “Can’t you see the bees all over me?” No one saw any bee

on him, but they were there all right. For him they were real. His guilty imagination took over his sanity.

At times he could be seen running as if chased by the same ants while beating his hands all over his body. He was insane now beyond redemption.

Since that time, people have never forgotten the ghostly beehive and its mysterious powers. Whatever evil a person does in secret, it will be revealed some day in his life.

For us a curse is more dreaded than even death. Our elders say *mawendi ter n'golyo*.⁶¹

What would have happened if the elders had decided to curse the suspect? In that case, all would have been called to a swearing ceremony that included taking vows. Before the whole assembly, the suspected person would stand naked in front of the beehive. While tapping it he would chant, "If at all I harvested your honey, may death take me away instantly."

Thus, the suspect would bring the curse upon himself. It meant that through the curse the spiritual protection had been removed, leaving the victim at the mercy of the immoral world of the evil spirits. That is why a curse was more frightening than war.

In our community, the power to invoke curses was invested in certain specialists.

These specialists were full of power. On most occasions they used simple words. They never said anything directly. Most of the

⁶¹As a poisonous arrow never misses its mark, so a word will never take a wrong course.

times, they merely stated, “The wind will show.” The wind spoke much louder in the form of lighting or whirlwind. There is the story of an old man herding his sheep and goats. One of the sheep had given birth. He tethered her to a tree while he led the rest to a river nearby. On arrival, he didn’t find the sheep but the lamb resting peacefully. After a long search, he concluded that something somewhere had caused the disappearance of his animal. For a long time he thought and finally concluded that nobody except, the tree had witnessed to what had happened. So he turned to it and said, “I left my sheep with you, but it has disappeared. You know whoever took it and yet you are silent. May you also perish like my beloved sheep.” He took the lamb and before he had gone far, the tree was uprooted by a whirlwind. Whatever power he used, nobody knew. He only spoke a word and it came to pass.

22

Our people had also a system of worship.

In every pororiet⁶² there was a *Kapkoros*⁶³ set apart for worshipping Asis. The ground was holy and no immoral thing could be done there. Prayers were offered after a certain period, but mostly after harvests and after successful cattle raids.

Whenever the pororiet elders identified a need, a seer was informed. He also had to inform the *Orkoiyot*⁶⁴ who sanctioned the prayer. As a testimony, he provided *ndasimiat*.⁶⁵ A day before the occasion, holiness was observed in the land excluding any form of immoral behaviour. It was during that day when most of the preparations were done.

⁶²A tribal division comprising several clans

⁶³An altar set on a specially designated holy ground

⁶⁴Chief Elder

⁶⁵Sacred plants

To begin with, the ground was cleared of any bush. It was then completely fenced leaving two gates: one to the west and another to the east. Sacred plants were brought. Also included in this sacred list were sodom apples, plants and fruits, an ox and a ram without blemish.

The Western gate formed the entrance into the altar or holy ground, while the eastern gate was the exit way.

At the entrances, two tall bamboo plants were planted at both sides of each gate. They appeared as flag posts. Down at the sides were sodom apple plants, and the rest of the sacred plants were tied together with *sinendet*.⁶⁶ At a height of six feet, sacred plants were tied across. All the sacred plants were required to be fresh. In addition, there were two gourds, one adorned with cowry shells and the other in its natural state.

At the entrance gate there was a basin hole. In it was a mixture of beer, milk, and *ngenda*.⁶⁷ A distance away was an altar formed by many sacred plants both green and dry. All these plants had a natural sweet smell when burnt.

The animals were killed for sacrifice through strangling. Their entrails were carefully observed for omens. It was a good omen if the intestines and stomach was full of food and also the veins in their linings were full of blood. The carcass was fit for a sacrifice if found in the said order. Blameless people, led by the division's seer, did most of the duties there. Only the collecting, clearing and building the fence was done by other people. Every segment of the carcass was cut and set apart for sacrifice, especially the fatty areas.

⁶⁶Sacred creepers

⁶⁷Ochre soil commonly given to cattle as natural salt

At dawn, the pieces of meat, fats, sorghum and millet (these were mainly from a virgin land) were set ablaze at the altar. The smoke could be seen rising high into the sky. It was called *alamaliet*.⁶⁸ If the smoke failed to rise, it meant that the deity did not accept the offering. This would mean repeating the sacrifice. The *maotior*⁶⁹ was assisted by two blameless children. A boy and a girl, while the rest of the people were outside the fence. The children were regarded “blameless” if their parents, sisters and brothers were all, alive and came from an upright home.

As the sun rose, the men entered, led by blameless elders in *sambut*.⁷⁰ Then the rest of the elders, warriors and women entered led by two blameless women in *semwet*.⁷¹ Finally, came children.

As they entered, the two youngsters brushed their feet with the mixture in the basin at the entrance using a flywhisk. Also the seer sprayed the participants with milk as they filed by.

The whole assembly circled around the altar solemnly four times before kneeling down. Prayers to Asis were offered for protection and prosperity in the land. Various oral blessings followed. *Orenet*⁷² songs were sung, and horns were blown to signify the success of the ceremony.

Later, leftovers of the meat were shared equally and finger rings out of the skins were cut and distributed to all people as a testimony of participation in the ceremony.

That was how our people observed the holy days.

⁶⁸Literally, an angel

⁶⁹Seer

⁷⁰Men's cloak

⁷¹Women's cloak

⁷²A valedictory song

Did our people accept cattle-raids spiritually?

Cattle were an important part of our people's life. They played a central role in the land. Though not worshipped, cattle were still regarded as the source of the sustenance of life. People could die for them. And like all pastoral communities, our people also believed that cattle were theirs by right and retrieving them was not a sin at all. Killing in war—even for self-defence—was an immoral act. A cleansing ceremony had to be performed for the defaulters by offering prayers to Asis and the departed ancestors to forgive and cleanse the land. Those found guilty of killing in a war were excluded from several functions of the society.

Cattle-raids on most occasions amounted to a fair distribution of wealth. The Luo can testify that on most occasions they were invited outside at night to grant to the would-be raiders some animals from their own kraals, in which case there would be no need for a raid. The custom of cattle-raids was never meant to involve murder.

Some activities during cattle-raids were forbidden. For example, looting a house, or burning it, or indulging in any immoral behaviour was punishable with a curse. Any excessive aggression in war, for example killing the innocent, the helpless or exhausting their livelihood also brought a curse on the offender.

Also, the practice of cattle-raiding was regarded like a hobby. Apart from adding wealth it also gave prestige to the raiders. Since it was a sort of sport, there was no malice behind it. The raiders could spy and later steal secretly without disturbing anybody. That was acceptable.

Another important thing was that once somebody had accepted a defeat, he was spared. Somebody climbing a tree, or in a hole or in a cave, or in a river, or who held soil, grass or a child in his hands could not be killed. Killing such a person brought a curse on the aggressor.

That is why in every war only people with wisdom, patience and understanding were needed. Their aim was to employ all their skills in procuring the cattle without destroying any life.

The entire procedure of cattle-raids was ordained by religious leaders during our time. This was because it was to test our skills and courage. It was also because it was the only known source of acquiring wealth. It was completely different from what is happening today.

Warriors returning from war were considered impure and could not freely intermingle with other people. I remember that whenever we returned from a war, we were all considered impure whether we had killed or not. Everybody who may have killed was doubly impure.

Those who had killed in the war were expected to proclaim their impurity by tying vultures' heads around their necks.⁷³ That showed that they had killed people. The curse intended for such people was brought upon the birds. So in that case the birds were to suffer for the actual deeds of the aggressors. In our community, vultures were regarded impure and associated with evil spirits.

⁷³Compare this with allusion to a similar practice in Western culture in Stephen King's *Dark Tower* series. It is interesting that the author's mentioning of this custom is independent of King's sources of information.
-Ed.

If we had killed in a war, then there would be a cleansing ceremony. A goat was slaughtered and its blood was poured onto our bodies. We were also bathed thoroughly with water mixed with herbs and were made to drink some of the same water. We were shaved, oiled, and sprayed with beer and milk. That was after each had repented of his sins, and our guilt had been taken away by the birds. Finally, we were provided with everything new including garments and weapons. The old garments, weapons, even our hairs, were thrown towards the setting sun. We had to drink an herbal medicine to provide internal cleansing. *Asis* and the ancestors were besought to forgive the land as well the culprits. After many such rituals were we finally ushered into normal life in our communities.

If someone had murdered in the process of acquiring cattle but did not confess to it, then the whole act remained a secret to him. In that case, there was no room for compensation and cleansing. But this would not help the culprit. After many years, his misdeed would be manifested in a ghastly manner. The animals he had stolen would low distressfully and die one after another. Finally, mental illnesses would strike the whole family as they also lowed like cattle and later groaned heavily as they died one after the other. The man finally might repent, but it would be too late, as he too would die. Possessing anything illegally was dangerous.

So cattle-raiding was not regarded as a spiritual offence. It was accepted as the normal way of life so long as it did not involve murder. Unfortunately, in those days there was no cattle trading, otherwise we would have acquired the cattle without going for the raids.

Also in our times, there was room for reconciliation between the affected communities. This could lead to compensation for loss of lives and properties. The disadvantaged community could be paid a certain number of animals agreed by both parties. That alone

could bring harmony between the parties and reduce bitterness and retaliation.

The basic purpose of cattle-raids was to ensure a fair distribution of wealth. Warriors could approach an enemy's homestead at night and take away some of the existing wealth, which in most cases happened without aggression. That happened commonly between the Kalenjin and the Luo people. Unfortunately, people forgot the good thing about cattle raiding later, and used this custom to cause murder and mayhem. Today people commit all kinds of crimes in the guise of cattle raiding. To make it worse, the elders sanction these raids. Furthermore, today people fight for the sake of taking other people's lands, a practice that was unknown in our times. The way I see things, cattle raiding is a thing of the past. There is no need of it now. Times have changed.

CHAPTER TWO

We Blew the Horn

1

Immediately after we had met with the elders, we left early in the morning, on our dangerous spying mission to the Kapkwambisi and Kamoriongo regions. On the eve of our departure, we had been showered with blessings by the elders who briefed us on what was expected of us during the course of our mission. Like everything else, war also has its own rules and regulations.

“My sons,” Telenges our tribal patriarch had said, “we send you on this mission with our blessings. The land awaits you anxiously to bring good news. You should be guarded by the norms governing such ventures, that you have already been taught. Watch carefully whatever comes before you. Some things mean bad omens while others portray abundant blessings.” He paused to tap his *Kipraut*¹ in preparation of shoving a pinch of tobacco into his mouth. He chewed it briefly with a bit of soda ashes before shooting out a stream of dark saliva.

He continued, “As we observed this morning, the entrails of the sacrificed animal revealed good omens, and that means that the venture is going to be a blessing.” Sure enough, they had done it early in the morning. This is how it was done. An animal, usually a

¹A small pouch used by elders to keep their tobacco and snuff

sheep without blemish, was strangled. It was slaughtered without disturbing its digestive system. Then the entrails were carefully examined. If the veins on the stomach walls and the intestines were full of blood, it was a good omen. Also if the stomach was full of digested food, it was good news as it would be a sign of abundance. If these signs were not present in the entrails, it meant bad omens and so the intended activities would be postponed for some time.

Telenges went on, “Also our *Maotik*² including Arap Sirtoet have brought us good news from our *Orkoiyot*³ that all is well. The Chief Elder has proposed that you leave through the upper route through Uasin Gishu. This is because on the lower route there are heavy rains around *Sieye*.⁴ The rivers down there are usually overflooded and are dangerous to cross. Again at this time of the year wild animals including elephants, buffaloes, rhinos, and lions are many. Another reason is that it would be necessary to survey the route for the next raiding mission. As I told you, watch carefully for unusual things. We have heard of the Tugen warriors who were waylaid and eaten by monsters appearing as human beings. You should be able to interpret the movements of animals and birds. For example, an antelope crossing before you or a woodpecker chirping at your left hand, or a raven in front of you showing its back, are all bad omens. It means that you either delay the journey or choose a different route. But if a woodpecker chirps at your right, or a raven faces you, it means a good omen. Go in peace.” He concluded.

“Our father has said many valuable things and I would like to add something,” contributed another elder as he stood to speak. “Unknown women bring bad omen, my children. A beautiful woman may come before you showing all her beauty while actually she is a witch or a spy. She may want to devour you, if she is a witch, or

²Seers

³Chief Elder

⁴Kakamega

would like to know of your mission, if she is a spy. Such things have happened before. You should be careful of wild animals. Be alert at all times. Share the little you have equally. Follow your leaders without complaining.

“Also never grumble on the way because such things may cause disunity. Do everything in unity and agreement as you have learnt from us. Your unity is of great importance. You know the story of three bulls, how their unity gave them protection and how they got separated by lions and later they were all killed one by one. May you be blessed!”

An elder was asked to bless us. He rose and led us in a song, and we cheerfully repeated in chorus the last word of every line:

<i>Emoni bo Nandi, baibai ole baibai</i>	<i>Baibai</i>
<i>Komi boisie, baibai ole baibai</i>	<i>Baibai</i>
<i>Komi chebiosok, baibai ole baibai</i>	<i>Baibai</i>
<i>Komi lagok, baibai ole baibai</i>	<i>Baibai</i>
<i>Ye bendi murenju, ribogis ole ribogis</i>	<i>Ribogis</i>
<i>Ngo tuiyo ak bunyo, imenit ole imenit</i>	<i>Imenit</i>
<i>Weksei komie ole weksei</i>	<i>Weksei</i>
<i>King ole king</i>	<i>King⁵</i>

⁵**Leader**

There is happiness in Nandi land
say there is happiness!

In it are elders, say there is happiness!

In it are women, say there is happiness!

In it are children, say there is happiness!

As worriers leave, say they are

chorus

There is
happiness!

There is
happiness!

There is
happiness!

There is
happiness!

After consultations with other age groups, we were given our provisions for the journey. These included garments, arms and food. We packed these items in preparation for an early departure the next morning.

Our garments were in good condition and so were our spears, arrows, bows, shields, swords and clubs. Our foods for the long journeys were ready. It included millet in calabashes. Also there was a mixture of meat and honey in traditional bags made out of goatskins for each of us.

Late in the evening we ate meat and drank milk before we slept.

2

After walking for several days, we had passed through Koyo, Kaptumo, Kosoiywo, Kipsigak and Ol'Lessos without much problem. We knew of those areas since we had traversed there during our previous assignments as sentries. As we were in a group, we felt secure. During nights we built thorn-enclosures for our safety, and made fires for our warmth and also for protection against marauding lions and other animals.

protected!

If they meet an enemy,
say may darkness overshadow them!

They will come back (safely) say they
will come back safely!

Amen, say Amen!

They are
protected!

May darkness
overshadow them!

They will come
back safely!

Amen!

When we crossed the plains of Uasin Gishu, we encountered many dangers. Dangerous animals were common and we were under threats of attack, especially from lions.

One afternoon near Sirgoit, we had planned to have some rest in a cave. We sent two young men to ascertain its safety. Soon they came back with a report that it was already hosting some animals.

Kibowen decided to watch its entrance. First he had to know the direction of the wind by throwing a handful of dust into the air. He found that the wind was blowing towards him from the cave. A change of the wind's direction could easily warn the beasts of our presence.

Kibowen waited patiently as he watched. Finally his patience paid. He began to see some movement in the cave. Only he was not sure which animal it was. Silently, he climbed a nearby tree for a better view. He learnt that the animals in the cave were a family of hyenas. Their three young ones were playing with the skull of an animal while their parents were fast asleep.

We received the information from him and immediately we made plans to attack them.

Kibiwott and I approached the cave from above while the rest waited readily with spears at the front. After a short while we were above them. I motioned Kibiwott to aim at one to his side while I took the other. I also motioned our friends to be ready.

Suddenly, the beasts sensed our presence, but it was too late. Well-aimed thrusts from our spears took care of the hyenas and their pups. Then with our swords we cut them into pieces and threw the pieces some distance away. We hope the meat would serve as meal to hyenas and other animals of the night and they would not disturb us.

We built a strong enclosure out of thorns for our protection during the night. We knew of the presence of lions as we had heard of their roaring. Since we were in an equally new environment, we could not make any fire for fear of attracting other human beings that might be our enemies. However, we slept peacefully that night, except quarrelling over the site where we had deposited the carcasses of the slain hyenas.

Early the next day we decided to rest for at least a day in order to refresh ourselves. Furthermore, we found the area abundant with a lot of wild fruits that supplemented our already diminishing stores.

In the afternoon, as we were resting, we saw a group of antelopes grazing nearby. We decided to kill one or two for food. We approached them stealthily and soon we had a huge bull at our feet. We carried it to the cave where we slaughtered it. During our earlier survey we had found that there was no human habitation around. At dusk we made fire and roasted our meat, which we hungrily ate. This happened in the inner part of the cave.

We felt very peaceful as our stomachs were full of tasty food, and we had enjoyed a full day's rest. Arap Sambai, our guide, told us various experiences he had had during his earlier spying missions.

3

"One day we were sent to spy on an enemy camp in Uasin Gishu near Cheptiret. The Maasai were still after us and especially our animals and land," he said, "They had camped there and had been there for several days. Maybe they had sent their warriors to spy on us. Little did they know that we had massacred all of them. For a couple of days, we spied their camp trying to know their plans. One evening we crawled on all fours till we

got close enough without them noticing our presence. We knew their language well and heard them grumbling about the way they had been let down by their spies who had failed to report on our movements. They intended to send other spies while moving slowly towards Nandi land. As we were retreating silently, we saw a movement ahead of us. We thought it was an animal. But after careful observation, we found that it was a couple of sentries. One was squatting while the other was seated. Darkness had concealed our presence. For a long time, we did not know what to do. We could crawl neither forward nor backward. We were greatly scared. What would happen if they remained in that position till morning! We prayed earnestly against such a move. We could not attack them from such a position, as only a few steps away were their camps still abuzz with activity.

“After a long time, they shifted their position. We shuffled away without breathing until we were at a safe distance.

“We could not make a viable attack on those people because they were about three hundred strong men. So we returned as quickly as possible through Kosoiywo and Koyo where we informed the sentries there of the impending war. Soon we reached Kaptumek, our home.

“Having informed the elders of the bad news, a war cry was raised asking all men to get armed as danger was looming. A fire was made above the Kapkeben cave to inform those who were still away that there was danger at home. Actually, they rushed and before long they were at home determined to defend their land, herds and people.

“We briefed them on what we had heard and soon a war preparations were made for war. All warriors were attired and fully armed. Some were so zealous and impatient to face their

aggressors that they had to be restrained. They were mad with fury.

“Before long we had traversed through Koyo, Kaptumo and Kosoiywo. At Kosoiywo we learnt from the sentries that they were still far away.

“We crossed Chepkunyuk, and there we were informed that they were not far away. We sent spies and they came back with the news that the enemy was camped at Sigilai. We decided to attack them right in their camp. They had prepared a feast as they waited for their spies to come back.

“Within no time we encircled their camp. But we knew we were not going to gain easy victory. Remember one thing. Never play with a Maasai moran. He is always ready for war. We had a fierce fight with spears and swords. One advantage we had over them was that we were fully prepared for them while they were taken by surprise. We killed many of them, but we also lost a lot of our men. The Maasai remnants slipped away never to visit our land again.

“So we saved our land. Had it not been for our ability as good spies, our people could have perished and our children and animals could have been captured. Whoever thought of placing warriors at tokwek⁶ was very wise, as enemies could have killed us easily. Another reason why we could defend our land is that we had real warriors who fought like men and not women.”

⁶Outposts

There Arap Sambai ended the story in tears shaking violently as the spirit of war had entered him.

4

Two days later we proceeded with our journey. It was much easier this time, as we had been strengthened by food and rest. Our Spirits were high as we hummed our common songs, possibly to make us forget the dangers ahead. Our journey progressed without any danger.

A few days later we arrived at the Segero hills where we got a good view of our journey forward. We could clearly see *Tulwab Kony*⁷ from our present position. The whole area rested below us. It was covered with tall grass and bushes. There were forests around the rivers and at the foot of Mt. Elgon. We made a detailed map of our journey

There we decided to spend the night, not knowing that it was our biggest mistake. Had we known that the night chill would freeze us, we could have chosen a warmer area for our rest, maybe in one of the valleys. But there we were, unprotected from the cold. The wind blowing from Cherangany hills through the Moiben River raised a bitter cold we had never known in life. The wind was whizzing and whistling at tremendous speed, which not only made our garments almost fly away but it also made us numb.

Surely we could have been frozen to death had it not been for the fact that our skins were already hard and dry. To make matters worse, we could not make any fire for that could have attracted the

⁷Mount Elgon

attention of the Marakwet and the Cherangany warriors. The land across Moiben was these warriors' zone.

Kiboit was shaking like a leaf does during stormy seasons. For several times he told his nearest warrior, "Will I surely see the next day? Will the sun really shine upon me? Oh poor me! Poor me! He repeated several times as his knees rested on his shaky chin. The chilly wind was beyond his tolerance. To him, his life was already heading towards *Sheu*.⁸ He wished he had died at home.

A neighbour told him, "Do you think you are alone in this wilderness? You are whimpering as if all your life you have been hidden inside your mother's *chepkauet*.⁹ Give us peace or go back to your mother." Kipsugut added, "He has been lying near a fire-place all this time and now it is his turn to learn."

The night crept on at a snail's pace. It only ended when we were at the point of giving up hope and surrendering our souls to the spirits land.

At long last, dawn came with hesitation as if it had no intention of visiting the land again. We were trembling like dry leaves in wind.

The sun finally shone, but it took a long time warm us. We did nothing much as we were tormented by the ordeal of the past night. We slept in the sunshine till afternoon. Then we ate and continued with our journey.

As we approached the crossing point at the Moiben River, Kibowen saw a movement up a tree that immediately alerted him.

⁸The spirits' land

⁹Petticoat

He said, "I have seen a movement in that tree. Either somebody, or an animal is watching our movements. We should be cautious since we don't know yet what it could be."

After talking in whispers, we decided to change direction but with an eye on whatever was up the tree. Never did we know that a leopard whose family was enjoying an afternoon nap on the rocks, near our intended crossing point, was keenly watching our movements. It was when we had altered our approach that we saw it clearly.

From the tree it slid down soundlessly and prowled towards our direction. It roared and all of a sudden a larger group of leopards appeared, ready to pounce on us. If there was anything I feared in my life, it was disturbing a leopard. I had killed many animals including lions, but killing a leopard was the trickiest of all. This is because leopards have great agility.

As we were still perturbed by the unexpected war, our saviour came. A wild pig sensed our presence, and unknowingly rushed blindly towards the pack of leopards. It realised its mistake when it was too late, but was caught about fifty steps away from us. The family took no more interest in us as they settled for their meal.

"What a relief!" Sighed Kiptum who like me greatly feared leopards. "I do not like them because of the way they leave skulls bare with their sharp claws," he said.

We rushed across the river to put a clear distance between the spotted cats and us.

"A leopard, my friends, is bad news," I broke the silence. Then I told them the story of the traveller and the leopard.

5

“Once upon a time, a traveller came across a leopard who was enjoying an afternoon meal. It was facing an opposite direction. The man in a moment reasoned that he had courted danger as he had almost stepped on its tail. Before the animal sensed danger, the traveller got a firm grip on its tail and pulled hard. The leopard found itself in the middle of an unexpected war and with ceaseless efforts it also pulled to free itself and face its assailant squarely. For a long time they pulled in opposite directions until both of them were exhausted and finally rested side by side.

Some time later it began all over for another length of time. Both the tail and the man’s hands were causing a lot of pain. Finally, the hands gave way and the leopard got his tail free but it was so confused that it could not even remember to retaliate. It trudged away for safety while the man crawled home on all fours”. We all laughed as we pictured a meaningless war that lasted many hours and none emerged the victor in the end.

6

Late that evening we crossed the Chepkaitit River, and were far away from the leopards.

We found a safe place under a huge tree that had fallen across a ditch. It was roomy to accommodate all of us. We also found that it had been hosting an animal, but that day we were the first to claim it. Cutting thorny branches, we built a strong enclosure for the night.

We ate a scanty meal from our calabashes and bags as we prepared for the night. We could not make any fire because we were in a foreign land. We slept in turns.

Early the next morning our guide, Arap Sambai, led us in the usual prayer that was very comforting to us, as we needed it for our survival.

Asis, Konech sapon
Asis, Konech tich
Asis, indoiwech ye kipendi
Asis, tuchechech bet ak kemboi
Asis, kasech kakisain¹⁰

As we prayed, we all stood facing the East with our hands spread out in earnest supplication to *Asis*.¹¹ We were humbled before our creator who is the provider of our needs. And as a sign of blessing we spat towards the east.

As we prepared to leave, Arap Sambai said, “We have so far travelled peacefully, though with minor incidences, which are expected anyway, and Asis has covered us safely. I am encouraged by your effective response to all the unbecoming situations we have so far faced on the way. I have come to know that our country still has dependable people. You have shown the highest discipline ever, unlike the previous parties I have led elsewhere.”

¹⁰God, give us health.
 God, give us cows.
 God, lead us as we go.
 God, cover us day and night.
 God hear us we pray.

¹¹God (Literally the Sun, cf. the name of the ancient Egyptian sun-god, Isis)

“Our destinations are before us. *Tulwab Kony*¹² is much nearer, while Kamoriongo is a distance away. Now onwards, our enemies will no longer be wild animals only, but human beings as well.

“This is the time when we must be extra cautious of our own surroundings. All our eyes and ears should now be sharper than before since our survival depends entirely on them. This is the time we need to persevere more than ever before, and we must have all patience as we monitor various events before us. May darkness cover us in the enemies’ land”. He concluded as we prepared to leave our hideout.

“The land before Tulwab Kony to the south is Kamelil (The present day Kimilili) where one of our *pororiet*¹³ of Kamelil lived a few years ago,” Kipsongol said, “We will pass below that hilly ground before you. Along that place, is a cave known as Chebinei, commonly known to the Kony people as Chebin. It is a cave full of mysteries.”

We burst into laughter at the name of the cave for it means sleeping with a woman.

Kipsongol was a man of action whose head was beginning to show grey hair. He was a huge monster of a person, full of steely muscles. He was tall, brownish, and had a potbelly that could store the meat of a full goat without any problem. He walked carefully as if his feet had a horror of stepping on the ground. He had big, bloodshot eyes that made people uneasy to look at him.

Remarkably, his body was covered with thick black hair that gave him the appearance of a gorilla. He was quicker than a cobra

¹²Mount Elgon

¹³A tribal division comprising several clans living in one place

and stronger than a bull. He was powerful enough to wrestle and slaughter a huge bull without anybody's assistance.

He was never idle, as his hard hands were busy making weapons in preparation for war. He was the best arrow-maker. He was full of wisdom, especially on matters related to the defence of the territory, as well as retrieving cows stolen by the Maasai people.

Kipsongol had no patience with fools and cowards.

He was very courageous, and had proved his power in many tribal wars that either saved the land from invaders, or enriched it by adding more herds. His conquests added Uasin Gishu, and other areas, as part of Nandi land after he succeeded in chasing the Maasai farther away.

He was a very good singer and dancer. Through his songs and dances, he could boast of his achievements. The gestures of his hands mimicked his huge cows with long horns, as he danced gracefully.

Unlike Kipsongol, Arap Sambai was black, short, but muscular. His hands were thick and short, and so were his legs. He was left-handed and was the best handler of the spear and the club than any person around.

But like Kipsongol, Arap Sambai too had no patience for cowards, especially in a battlefield. He would kill a coward of his own tribe before killing his enemies. And that was the reason why he was chosen to lead many wars in Nandi land.

Two days later we had crossed the two rivers, *Ainomaget*¹⁴ and *Kimoson*,¹⁵ and advanced speedily towards Mt. Elgon, the mountain of the Kony. Nothing much happened on the way, apart from frequent sightings of animals that were becoming more and more daring as our journey proceeded. Also, there were plenty of wild fruits on our way, and our stomachs were always full.

Having crossed the Kimoson river, we camped for the night, but that night was a terrible one. To begin with, hyenas wreaked havoc as they continually attacked us. Their attacks were more determined than others, which had attacked us on earlier occasions. However, a strong enclosure of thorny plants we had built proved very protective, though we never had a wink of sleep throughout the better part of that night. Actually, it was their territory and we were aliens. The hyenas had every right to defend it from alien intruders. We tried to stab them with our spears, but could not do much as their eerie shrieks made us too nervous. On one occasion, they all ganged up, and with determination attacked from all sides, tearing apart our thorny fence as they closed in to destroy us.

It appeared to us that their war cry was attracting more members of their tribe, as the pack grew large. Finally, they were exhausted and left us. We slept late and continued to sleep until afternoon.

Our journey towards *Kata-lal*,¹⁶ proved dangerous again. It was during that period that we had heavy rains, and in most cases, we had nowhere to hide. Once again, the chilly winds descending from Mt. Elgon made our nights uncomfortable.

¹⁴River Nzoia

¹⁵River Koitobos

¹⁶Kitale

In addition, we found that wild animals like elephants, buffaloes and rhinos were very common because of the heavy growth of vegetation. On top of the list were lions that were more dangerous than all other animals we had come across, as they were active both day and night. Our courage was greatly challenged by these merciless creatures.

However, trees were of great assistance to us in that occasionally we could climb up trees to check our route ahead and its surrounding dangers. We knew of the presence of jungle beasts and their relatives. This enabled us to avoid any confrontation with them. But we continued to advance with renewed determination everyday, as the accomplishment of our mission was becoming more appealing than ever before.

Late one evening, we came across a stretch of bamboo forest and with great caution and silence we entered the forest. We were happy to find enough room that could accommodate all of us. It appeared as if it had previously been used by animals, possibly a family of gorillas. By weaving the branches of the bamboo trees we created a sort of a house that was warm, but not strong enough to protect us from the fierce beasts and their predators.

For the first time, we slept hungry. We had earlier exhausted all our stocks, and the day had been so tiring that we had no time to collect any.

We had already begun to starve and this could hinder our forward movement. For a long time, we talked in low tones concerning the impending dangers, and how to defend ourselves. Above all, we were concerned about our lack of food. But our desperation did not dampen our spirits. We were already determined to accomplish our mission. At times, I wondered whether there was really any point in going through all this torture.

We were feeling discouraged by these new problems. But we knew that men were born to face the world as raw as it was. Men's duty was to sacrifice themselves to create prosperity, peace and harmony in the land. The Kalenjin word *Muren*¹⁷ comes from the word *Kemur*,¹⁸ which means to bar. Anyway, we were expected to sacrifice ourselves to repossess our animals, and guard the land. So we were on that mission in preparation of re-possessing what the Maasai had stolen from our land.

Arap Sambai said, "This is the time to exercise our courage as men, not as women or children. Dangers are many, but we should be prepared to defend ourselves to the last man.

Those of you, who are undertaking this venture for the first time, must know that we have seen worse. On many occasions spies have perished and have never been seen again. Some were captured and taken to far away places. That actually happened because they moved carelessly."

Finally, we managed to sleep, but not peacefully. We encountered things that had never happened. First, to awaken us suddenly was the roar of a bull lion. It was quite close to us and created a great terror among us. We could feel the fear in the air that made us lost hope in life. To me the lion was summoning its relatives for a major kill. The bamboo bushes around us were nothing to a ferocious and determined lion. The night was so heavy with darkness that we could not see even our own hands. We got ourselves prepared in case of any attack. It is very hard to fight a lion and even harder in low visibility. The king of the jungle was for a long time silent, which made us even more nervous. As if that was not enough. Soon new activities started. A heavy movement in the bush lowered our spirits further.

¹⁷Man

¹⁸Barrier

Either elephants, or buffaloes, or both, were advancing towards us. They stalked all over trumpeting loudly. The sound of bamboo cracking under their heavy footfalls made us greatly scared. It was like a series of explosions. It was only by good luck that we escaped destruction that night, as the wind did not betray our presence.

It was only much later at night that we were able to sleep for some time.

We woke up early and for a long time nobody spoke. We were overwhelmed by the night's events. However, as men, we regained our spirits as soon as the sun rose. Immediately we prepared to leave, but not before we had wiped out all signs of our presence.

Having travelled for a very long time, we came across the first signs of human beings. A recently harvested beehive filled us with a sense of hope and fear. We were happy that finally our mission was going to be successful, although we were fully aware of the dangers that lay on our way.

"At long last, we have arrived at our destination," Kipsongol, our guide, said. "We are now in the enemy territory with its own dangers.

You should know that the type of security we have at home is similar to the one here, since we are cousins of the Kony people. They also have sentries in various hidden out-posts as we have at home. So it is going to be too unfortunate if we were to stumble upon them. They will never hesitate to slaughter us like unwanted dogs. From now onwards every step must be made cautiously and with the agility of a leopard. One of us will at all times be moving ahead to survey the route, while we follow a few steps behind. Our sentry should know how to coo like a dove to indicate whether it is safe or dangerous."

I, Sigilai was honoured with the responsibility of being the front man. My previous experience in tracking wild animals played an important role in this job. I knew when to stop for observations and when to move. My earlier experience had taught me how to walk in a stooping posture like a monkey. After walking some distance, I stopped and interpreted almost every movement of small animals and birds, and even the foliage. After noticing nothing suspicious, I cooed. The rest joined me in the same manner.

We made further plans and verifications before proceeding in the same manner as before. Shortly, I came to a stream, and before crossing I cooed out another peaceful message.

As my companions were joining me, I made the biggest discovery. Surely many animals had crossed and re-crossed the stream, but what attracted my attention most were fresh human footprints not older than a couple of hours. I came to notice that they belonged to not more than two or three people who appeared to have been walking leisurely, possibly hunters who had not attempted to conceal their movements.

I motioned to my colleagues, and we moved farther to a secluded terrain where I briefed them on the new discovery. We waited in a prostrating position, facing all directions, as we talked in whispers.

Soon our patience paid. Three men—one was elderly—emerged from the thickets. One was carrying a full honey bag, with bees swarming above it in protest, but he was not bothered about the bees. The other two were carrying the carcass of a recently killed animal, with blood still dripping. From the looks on their faces, they were totally satisfied with their expedition, as they talked in

low voices and were not keen at concealing their movements. To us they appeared like *Okyek*,¹⁹ the bush people.

I got so much absorbed by the behaviour of those people who had no care at all apart from hunting. As far as we knew, their major existence revolved around honey and meat. Even the wildest bees were nothing to them. Just imagine a man provoking bees by knocking at the beehive, to wage war against him purposely. Once the bees were out, he offered his face to be stung till totally white with stings. And finally, he would drive them away while he harvested the honey they had stored in the hive. That was part of the normal life of the Dorobo.

Two of us were asked to follow them and find their destination. After one hour, our spies came back with news that they lived in a cave not far away. We had suspected it earlier. They further informed us that the *Okyek* hunters were busy with the collection of meat and honey. Other men in the cave worked to preserve the food by drying it in the sun and applying salts to it. Finally the food would be taken home.

There were no women and children in the cave.

I recalled a story about the *Okyek*.

There was one *Okiyoot* who had killed a buffalo and was in the process of skinning it when he saw a movement that appeared as a shadow. Immediately he knew that somebody had spied on him and would soon forcibly demand a share. What he did was to remove his skin garment and arranged it to resemble somebody bent in action. He hid inside a thicket nearby with his bow and arrows. Not long after, the covetous fellow came back, armed, and threw a spear at

¹⁹The Dorobo people

the bundled garment looking like a “person”. It hit it squarely. Jubilantly he came forward praising his lucky stars and wits, but his celebrations were short-lived as he saw a naked person emerge from the thicket shooting an arrow that never missed. The intruder died instantly and his remains were dragged further. The hunter continued as if nothing had happened.

We laughed silently at that story. It relieved us of our tension.

“We are also told that one could never corner a Dorobo, because of his slyness,” contributed someone. “There is this case of a Nandi man who saw a Dorobo coming towards him carrying a bag of honey. The Dorobo saw the man in advance, and automatically knew that he would be the loser.

He decided to mark time briefly, appearing to be moving forward while actually moving backwards in the same manner. The intruder thought that the Dorobo was surely approaching. He got ready for a kill, wetting his lips, only to realize that the fellow had disappeared into a nearby bush. I tell you that these fellows run much faster in the bush than in an open field.”

“You see, when these Dorobo mean business, you will never catch them,” somebody added, laughing.

“I tell you these people are very queer,” somebody offered. “There was a family of the Dorobo who lived in a bamboo forest. They had only one child, a girl who was well versed in vigilance. As the parents left early in the morning for food collection, they could not leave their hideout unguarded. But their child was young. She could be killed by animals like hyenas, or stolen by other people. What they did was that they brought together tall bamboo stems and tied them together inwardly forming something like a basket at the top. There they placed their daughter and the stems were left to rise with her on top. Coming back later in the day, they cooed like

doves, and if the child responded in the same manner, they knew that all was well. And if there was silence, they knew that an intruder had camped nearby. They would then plan to kill the foreigner. If, however, the foreigner were a visitor to the family, he would sit with a green branch in his hands. The girl knew how to communicate the same to her parents.

“I like the Dorobo for one thing,” Kipsugut contributed. “If there are people who know how to preserve food for many years, these are the ones. Let me tell you what they do. First the meat was well cooked in earthen pots and later dried in the sun. Huge containers out of tree blocks were made. This is how it was made. The huge trunk blocks were split along the length into two. Both parts were burrowed at the centre to create something like a traditional beehive. One of the parts acted as a lid when brought together. The dried meat and honey were mixed thoroughly, poured into the containers, sealed with wax, and buried in the ground where they remain for many years. During the long rainy seasons when hunting and honey collections were impossible, the whole family moved to the site where they remained as long as the food lasted. So in most occasions a Dorobo had many stores of food hidden in many places.”

“Also, among the Dorobo there is respect,” one of us contributed. “Each family owned a tract of forested area that could not be visited by any other family as that amounted to trespass. It was severely punishable. Therefore, no one could enter another family’s forest unless invited. An animal hunted for food could take refuge in somebody’s forest. The hunter could not pursue the animal unless he obtained the authority of the owner. In the same way, theft of beehives was effectively checked.”

We enjoyed such stories as we cultivated our spirits. Once again we felt light-hearted. We even managed to smile, something we had not done for a long time. This may have been caused by the

presence of other human beings near us, though we could not imagine interacting with them.

Having talked more among ourselves on our mission, we finally decided to proceed. We avoided the Dorobo and their cave as far as we could. We were famished, and could have wished to share their stores, but that would mean inviting death.

By the time we came to another stream, we were too exhausted. We drank water not because we were thirsty, but because we were hungry. Then we planned our next move. As the night was approaching, we had two items to plan about: food and shelter. Having been in a thick forest for several days, it was impossible for us to find our direction, or even gauge the time.

We crossed the stream and proceeded towards what we thought was a western direction. Soon we spotted a large rock, and underneath it a cave. When we entered the rather shallow cave, we found old ashes and some scattered half-burnt wood.

We shared responsibilities. Some of us were to prepare the place, while others were to hunt for food, and the rest to act as sentries.

As dusk approached, we had made good progress. The food hunters returned carrying several honeycombs. We were so excited as we chewed them. Our mouths were full of the white stuff of the bee's larvae. We thanked *Asis*²⁰ and our ancestors for that miraculous provision. The honeycomb with the larvae provided a warm milky substance that gave us full satisfaction. That meal uplifted our spirits and gave us a ray of hope in life.

²⁰God

We laid our shields across the entrance and after quick consultations we slept like dead bodies till morning. The cave was so warm and comfortable that we were reluctant to leave it in the morning. But we had a mission to accomplish. We left after ensuring that our presence would not be detected.

We noticed that the area was formed by many ridges and streams. This was a great obstacle to our movement. That day was the toughest as we moved up and down that our knees caused a lot of pain. We followed a beaten route, possibly made by elephants several months ago. We ate or drank nothing except some water on the way.

As the day waned, we came across a hideout formed by a huge tree that had fallen down, and in the process had brought several others to the ground. In between them were several spacious “rooms” that could each accommodate three to four persons. The timbers were so dry that any disturbance could easily warn us. As the previous night, we slept peacefully though our stomachs complained of hunger the whole night.

We awoke at dawn and after a brief consultation, we decided to look for food as we continued. We visited several trees expecting to find fruits or beehives. Unfortunately, we found nothing. Forest life proved very difficult now. We crossed many streams and ridges without any sign of food and human beings. In silence, we moved as we contemplated our immediate future.

During this time when we felt that we were heavily burdened. Our weapons were becoming a heavy load as our hunger hampered our journey forward. We succumbed to our fatigue so much that we felt like resting every few steps, something that had not happened before. Our other problem was security. If we were attacked by wild animals or other human beings, would we be able to defend ourselves?

As we were lost in these thoughts, we could find ourselves stumbling and at times sprawling with no strength. To make matters worse, none of us was able to support another. Life was now actually difficult for us.

Our sorrows and desperation were pressing upon us heavily and so were frustrations and dangers. Then something happened that was beyond my imagination. All that I remember is that I heard a crash behind me. I thought that possibly a branch had fallen down from a tree, which is a normal occurrence. But that was not so.

Immediately I heard somebody wailing and in need of urgent assistance. I thought he had been crushed. With the little strength remaining in us, we turned and looked. We came face to face with a cheetah that had landed squarely on top of our screaming colleague. The cat was anticipating a good lunch while our friend was at the mercy of death. Possibly, the cheetah had been observing our movements and direction, and our physical weakness. It may have placed itself in a well-hidden place up a tree, expecting little confrontation from its victim.

Because of our situation at that time, we had been too careless to detect its presence through scent. That was extremely unfortunate. The cheetah up in the tree had made the successful discovery of a weak one amongst us. The beast pounced upon him so heavily that the impact almost paralyzed the life of our already dying colleague.

Of course he had been so weak because of the exhaustive and endless journey worsened by hunger that I thought that he would surely welcome death rather than all this pain. Furthermore, he had been a problem to us all, as we had to carry all his provisions, even at times dragging him along. He was actually a thorn in our flesh.

On many occasions, he had complained that he would opt for death rather than this useless mission.

“Help! Help! It is killing me!” Kipkogei screamed desperately, as the cheetah’s claws worked on him viciously. The cat was ready for us too.

With its dogged determination, it gave our friend a powerful slap that left his face dribbling with blood. As our friend became rather dizzy from the effect, the cheetah moved forward towards our direction with all the intention of defending its meal.

Killing a cheetah is no simple matter, bearing in mind that it is the fastest animal in the bush. It can also jump in self-defence, or to escape. It is a very sly and agile animal. It can easily jump over a well-aimed spear.

As we retreated, the cheetah got an opportunity to drag away its prey that was still dizzy under the impact.

Unfortunately our presence did little to deter the animal, which held our friend as a shield. Poor Kipkogei! He was in soup. His captor was in no mood of ceding its well-earned meal to us.

With teeth snarling at us, it moved forward while roaring viciously. It wanted to fight us.

Knowing that we could neither shoot an arrow, nor throw a spear, we were just encircling the predator and its prey in a slow death-dance.

For a long time we danced in a circle with our spears poised and swords drawn forward. This was all we could do.

At one point, as Kipkogei tried to escape, the cheetah noted his movement and like lightning it was back on him again and started to drag him away.

Finally, we got our chance as one of us gave it a full blow on the back with his club. It made an angry jump at Kipsugut who was ready for it. At the speed of lightning, he slashed the cat to death. All that I saw was a head rolling while its body was still in a murder mood.

Our friend, on seeing his chance to escape, rose from the ground. He could not control his anger as he picked the nearest weapon and gave a second blow to the lifeless body of the beast. He was covered with wounds, but none were fatal.

From then onwards, he learnt his lesson and became more vigilant than before. He was no longer a thorn in our flesh.

Later in the evening, two things happened. One, we found a beehive under a fallen tree. We were extremely happy at that providence that saved our lives. To tell the truth, I had not expected to see the next day, but Asis gave us a new lease of life. The other thing that happened was that we found the ashes of a recent fire, and around it some scattered bones, indicating a sort of a feast that seemed to have just taken place. We surveyed our surroundings carefully as we marvelled at the huge bones. A short distance away we found a buffalo's skull totally cleaned by the hyenas. We guessed that the concerned party never stayed. That gave us the idea that they could not have eaten the whole animal alone as their place of origin was near.

Our journey proceeded with the hope that we were about to accomplish our mission. So we did all that was possible to make sure that our movements were undetected. At long last, we found a shelter, a sort of an enclosure made of woods heaped together,

possibly used as an outpost. After careful observation from some distance, we saw no movement around. One of us approached quietly and out came an antelope that scampered away into a nearby thicket. We noted with satisfaction that all was well within. Nothing else happened apart from a hyena that had followed us since morning, and was watching us from a distance, possibly hoping for a kill. Our man came back with the news that the hideout was frequented by other men, as was shown by ashes and a club left behind.

We stayed outside, hidden in a nearby thicket till dusk, then we all entered the enclosure and for a long time we were not at ease. Possibly our fear was that the owners may return unexpectedly. Nothing happened. We talked in whispers as the hyena protested of being cheated out of a meal. I was wondering how the fellow could be interested in our bony bodies. At one time it tried to break in forcefully, but a sharp thrust from the spear sent it howling away to the Land of Sheu.²¹ We then slept peacefully.

The next day was a day of blessings. To begin with, a couple of hours after we left our hideout, we were blessed to find beaten routes made by cows and their day-old droppings. We noted this with concern. Our major problem was to discern their destination whether they were moving towards pastures or away from them.

We were rewarded when we heard a cow mooing below where we stood. As we descended stealthily to have a better view, we were amazed to see cattle, sheep and goats grazing peacefully. That good sight made our hearts race with excitement as we admired them. All our past sorrows flew away as we made this discovery.

Actually our kinsmen, the Kony, were so blessed with many animals that our hearts were full of envy. We marveled at the fat flocks, and our saliva dripped as we gazed at the full udders of the

²¹The Land of the spirits

cows. The bulls and oxen were huge and fat. Never had I seen such beautiful animals before. To speak the truth, we were so much captivated by that wondrous sight that we even forgot about our own security. Surely the firstborn son of *Kuugo*²² was a prosperous man!

The inheritance that could have been equally shared among the other sons had made him so rich while others were languishing in poverty. Oh God, what a waste! I clicked my tongue as I remembered our malnourished children at home, and the expectant mothers having no food to eat, and no milk and blood to drink. And before us were part of our share of livestock. I found my eyes streaming with tears as I remembered the pitiable condition at home.

For a long time we watched. Herdsmen were moving among the cattle while others were keeping watch over sheep and goats. Bulls were bellowing all over, throwing heaps of soil with their horns. Never had I seen such giant bulls that looked like buffaloes.

As we were still in that happy trance, something brought our senses back to the reality around us. About fifty steps away, we spotted a Kony warrior, keeping watch over herdsmen and their animals. He was well armed, peaceful, and satisfied with the activities below. Had he known that prying eyes were admiring his charge, he would have exploded in anger. He didn't know that his long forgotten kinsman was preparing to claim a share of his pride.

"We need to be more alert now than ever before," Arap Sambai our guide whispered to the rest of us. "There must be many more Kony warriors hidden in various bushes, even above in the tree branches. Any slight movement can easily attract their attention which will bring death." There, in prostrating positions, we breathed softly as kittens.

²²Grandfather

For a long time we watched in all directions, and even up the trees, for any sign of movement, while stealing looks of admiration at the animals below.

After a long time, our sentry was joined by three others, and they conversed in low tones as their eyes moved from one direction to another. At one time I thought we had been discovered as I watched one gazing in our direction. My brow sweated, filling my eyes with the stinging fluid. I could not rub it away for fear of attracting the attention of our cousins across.

For a long time we remained prostrated, as each contemplated on the next move.

At noon the herdsmen drove their animals to a water point, an exercise that lasted several hours. The sentries had shifted their position to somewhere not far from where we were, to have a clear view of the activities below.

The animals later continued grazing as before, while others were already under the trees, chewing the cud. Later in the evening, to our relief, the sentries joined the rest of the herdsmen and prepared to leave homewards, leading their herds.

One of the activities performed by the herdsmen, apart from herding, was pulling ticks from the cattle. As we watched in amusement, the pests, almost bursting with the blood of the cattle were a delicious meal to the herdsmen, either raw or roasted. Just imagine those fellows chewing happily the ticks as if their livelihood depended on them. That was the reason why they were very healthy. We were also doing the same thing back at home. I think it would have been very unfair to the cows to throw the ticks away, while occasionally we could draw blood from them. There was nothing wrong with eating the ticks, knowing that they had gotten the blood from our animals. Also these herdsmen were drinking fresh milk by

sucking the teats of a cow, just the way we did at home. It was good to be a herdsman, wasn't it?

8

Like ghosts, we followed them. Soon, their homes came to our view. Though we at home talked boastfully of our security, our security would be nowhere as effective as that of the Kony. Our *Kuugo*²³ was actually a great man, and although already dead, he would be proud of his firstborn's descendants. The enclosure, later to be known as *irimetab Kapkwambisi*²⁴ to our people, was there before us. It was a complete fortress that manifested a most secure people among the Kalenjin community.

First, a deep *keringet*²⁵ of three steps wide was dug around a large area of land. Immediately inside was a very strong fence made of equally strong poles planted firmly into the ground. At the base of the tunnel were sharp pointed pieces of wood firmly planted onto the entire floor. Whatever fell into it was as good as dead. Then, thorny branches were interwoven so thickly through the fence that even a cat could not pass through. Furthermore, there were all kinds of thorny trees planted all round the fence, forming a thick barrier. The fence was so high that one could not look over it at close range. We were able to see all those activities at a higher level, a safe distance away.

After the fence, the gates attracted our attention. They were strong and before them were moveable bridges. At night the bridges were pulled in by many strong people. An enemy had no opportunity of visiting those people unexpectedly at night. And furthermore, there

²³Grandfather

²⁴Enclosure of Kapkwambisi

²⁵Deep tunnel

were beehives at the gates that, apart from providing food, also provided security. In case of any attack, the beehives were knocked so as to alert the bees into activity. It was equally impossible to climb from the tunnel, as that would mean jumping over the fence, which was not possible. Many wild animals, like elephants and buffaloes, having slipped into the tunnel had died, as they had no escape route.

Even though the gates were quite secure, yet security men were posted at all entrances. I just wondered why we came all that distance to this impenetrable *ngorit*.²⁶ The whole structure was the pride of the owners, but very frustrating to those of us who wanted to raid it.

Inside the fortress were many scattered low houses, roofed and plastered with cow dung and known to the Kony as *gorikab kumalisiek*²⁷ Adjacent to them were several grass-roofed houses. Next to every homestead were kraals, each for cattle, flocks and calves.

Another marvel was that the fortress appeared like a large calabash at the tip of which was a large *kebenet*²⁸ like ours of Kapkeben, in Southern Nandi.

“*Aboitab Acheeri!*” exclaimed Kipsugut. “Was it built by people or ghosts?” To him it was beyond human strength. For a long time nobody spoke, as we all were baffled.

“But how did they dig that tunnel surrounding the fortress?” One asked, and he concluded that those people were superhuman.

²⁶A strong gate

²⁷Low houses plastered with a mixture of soil and cow dung

²⁸Cave

“I have been told that in the spirit land you see such mysteries as are before us. Vast expanses of land are ploughed in the morning, planted, germinated and weeded during the day, and by the evening they are ready for harvesting. Maybe this is the land.” I added in dismay.

“But they are ordinary people with everything that we have at home.” One contradicted my opinion.

“But even the spirits have cows and families.” Kibiwot smiled as he defended me.

“And what are these people, surely?” Asked Kiboit as he saw the impossible things.

“But they are people like us,” said Kipsugut. “See, they also have herds, and are just clothed like our own people.

“But even the spirits in their land have everything we have at home, and some are more blessed with herds than we are. They also harvest, make beer, cook food, and enjoy other things of life, I am told.” Said Arap Sambai. “They too have circumcision ceremonies, engagements, and marriages, as we have at home.”

“You mean they also marry and have spirit children?” Somebody asked. We all laughed in whispers as we formed pictures of ghost brides being given in marriage and paying ghost cows as dowry.

“That could be, but these are the real Kony people, rearing our real share of cows, not ghosts,” Kipsongol concluded.

The cave was the centre of various activities as it acted as storage facility as well as an armoury. Also, during rainy seasons

many people, along with flocks and calves, could take shelter in this cave

As we watched, women and young men were busy milking their cows and goats. Calabashes were filled with milk. We watched with envy men drinking the fresh milk from calabashes. I found myself watching the movement of calabashes with a great desire of tasting even a drop of it.

I could not restrain myself from watching the journey of the containers from hands to mouths, wishing that lightning could strike all warriors in the fortress leaving the animals and milk to us. I was just like a dog watching its master enjoying a delicious meal without any thought of sharing it with the dog.

As dusk approached, fires were lit at the three entrances for the night watchmen, who were talking and laughing excitedly. We had also noticed a shallow cave nearby. And as darkness fell, we retreated to our hideout where we talked in whispers. To our surprise, the place was very peaceful. Perhaps the fortress had scared the wild animals so that they had decided to keep away from it.

Late at night, as the moon shone brightly, two of us—Kibowen and I—were assigned the duty of spying to get a closer view, and we did this successfully. Like shadows, we moved around the fortress and we discovered, to our dismay, that penetrating through the enclosure was almost impossible.

As we moved around the fortress, dogs protested from within as they howled in distress. Possibly they didn't like our smell. The dogs could have been right. We hadn't bathed for a couple of months. And having slept in many caves previously acting as lairs, we were very much smelling like wild animals. But to the men inside, barking dogs were a common phenomenon as wild animals would at times be lurking around their fortress. Had they had a sense of smelling,

they would have known that the dogs were barking at a danger that was to befall them. We found that only the gates were the possible means of entrance, but these were highly guarded, and entering them by force would be like committing suicide.

At long last we reported what we had seen to the group. After talking in whispers, we decided to observe the fortress more carefully the next day. We slept lightly that night. It appeared as if we had made a useless journey with all those dangers and risks we had undergone. Still, we had to make the return journey back, which would be riddled with equal dangers, possibly more.

Early the next day, we carefully studied the *irimet*²⁹ and concluded that raiding it was impossible, unless we waged a full-scale war, which would be more advantageous to the inhabitants. The warriors in it were strong and well armed, and in a large number. It was equally impossible to cross the tunnel and at the same time climb the thorny fence. So it meant attacking from the gates, but overcoming the bees was nothing short of a war by itself. Furthermore, the Kony warriors were better armed than we had expected them to be.

Any plan to disarm them would be like stepping barefoot on a cobra. So we were at our wits' end.

Planning a daytime raid was just like inviting death. One could not make a successful war with people having the same weapons and experience, and in their own land.

As we watched, the animals were milked. Men moved among them checking the sick, and removing ticks and leeches. Later these men were provided with fresh warm milk, which they drank leisurely as we watched, swallowing our saliva while our hungry stomachs

²⁹Enclosure

rumbled. Anyway, I was ready to surrender everything in exchange for that milk, if someone were to offer it to me. In dismay, we moved further into the jungle where we had a war council as we pondered our survival. We concluded that our mission had been a complete waste of time. But our consolation was that we had seen what we came here to see.

For a long time, we pricked our minds for a solution to the problem. As I sat with my palms supporting my cheeks trying to weigh the risks involved with the imminent raid, I was forced to accept defeat.

Arap Sambai said, "This is something I didn't expect to find. To me it is impossible to raid and overcome these people. I have seen impossible situations before, but this one crowns them all. The whole thing is just like splitting a rock using your bare hands. Impossible!"

"I accept your verdict," Kibowen said. "These people are many and well armed. To make matters worse, there are those movable bridges. Even if we can reach the bridges, what about the bees, what about the gates, and what about the night guards?"

For a long time, no one spoke as we weighed various options. I could see that most of my colleagues were frustrated as they saw our mission coming to nothing. We had one common problem and that was what to tell our people at home. I could not bring myself delivering half-baked information that could make us a laughing stock for many generations.

Finally, I said, "Fellow men, I have an idea that might bring a solution to our problems." I briefed them and at the end of it our spirits were uplifted and our physical strength seemed to return. "We must set the whole place on fire."

My colleagues were much excited as they considered my suggestion, while shaking hands in a celebrative mood.

We thanked our departed ancestors for their guidance in our hour of need. Even hunger and fatigue disappeared. For several days, we moved around them like ghosts, as we assessed their strengths and weaknesses.

Later, with renewed strength, we embarked on a journey to the *Kamoriongo*³⁰ Land.

Having left the fortress, we moved eastwards. In our tribal values, the East is very significant. It is to the East that we throw our old teeth and from the East that we received new ones. We send our prayers to the East and we receive blessings from the East. Most of the tribal activities, like worship, took place at the rising sun and bad omens and other sufferings came from the setting sun.

For two days, we proceeded before changing our direction southward. Our major intention was to avoid all areas hosting wild animals, and more important, to evade the Kony security men in their out-posts. Late one evening we arrived at a place where we knew that our cousins were not present. We found a very good cover for the night. It was between two jutting rocks forming a depression. From our own observation we found that animals were frequenting it. We made ourselves secure by building around it a strong fence out of thorny branches. Actually, we were fortunate to have such a wonderful abode. As some of us moved around to guard our newly found quarters, they stumbled upon a heard of wildebeests that were grazing peacefully. We thought that it was

³⁰Land of the Maasai people

food from the sky as we were in dire need of food. Killing one of the wildebeests was not a problem to us, hunters.

For reasons of security, we could not light any fire there. By dusk we had already skinned the carcass and were enjoying the raw meat. It tasted delicious. Later we had a sound sleep the whole night, as there were no external disturbances.

The next day we woke up late but with satisfied stomachs. As we were finishing off the remains of our previous banquet, Arap Sambai said, "As far as I can see we have made good progress. The spirits of our ancestors have been kind to us."

"Kamorongongo is before us," said Kipsongol.

"Also we should know that that is a grazing area for both the Kony herds as well as the Maasai." Arap Sambai added.

"We have not had any ugly incidence up to now. We have been united even in our failures. This is very encouraging and means that our sincerity in this mission has proved its worth. As from tomorrow, we are continuing in the southern direction towards *Kibortiet*.³¹

"Kibortiet was the land where the Maasai resided temporarily. The land in question belonged to the Nandi people before they came in clash with the *Kamorongek*³² people. They later followed our people and on many occasions there were wars at Chepterwai, Chemuswo and Sigilai. It was at Ol'Lessos that the Maasai were thoroughly routed. They were massacred there through the might of our elders of *Kipkoimet* age-set and a division among them came about. Some ran away towards north while others retreated towards

³¹Webuye in Western Kenya

³²The Maasai

Mt. Elgon. They had stolen our cows before the great defeat and it is time we got them back.

“There is a saying, “*ma igestoegei sekem pon.*”³³ This means that when a disaster strikes, not all people perish together. That applies to the Nandi people also. When our fathers left this area before us, pursued by the Maasai, there are two families we know who remained behind. They are known as the families of Kapchebwai and Kapcherop. I know where they are found and we hope that they would provide us with our needs. They are our kinsmen whom we have visited on several occasions. We are going to stay with them during our spying mission.

“My friends, their hospitality is incomparable and we will be treated as honoured guests. Wait and see.” Our elder ended his discourse.

So we decided to have a day’s rest while we continued enjoying the wildebeest’s tasty meat. The news of our Nandi remnants around the land of *Maraba*³⁴ was the best news ever. We were more eager to see them than we were to see our relatives at home. We wanted to talk with other human beings, to share our sorrows and happiness and above all to get healing in our minds and spirits.

9

That was so many years ago that I have lost counts as to how many age-sets have gone to the spirits land since then. New ones were born and are ageing much faster. Now that I am about to see the re-manifestation of Kaplelach, my age set, I hope not to see another

³³The after the migration, some bees are still around hovering around the beehive.

³⁴The present day Malaba on the Kenya Uganda border

stubborn age-set in Nandi land. My age-set was very stubborn indeed and never valued the advice of the aged. Many of us were pierced not only at the earlobes, but also at the lips, where we had tied pieces of broken calabashes. They were meant for further beautification but we could jingle them whenever advice offered that was not compatible with our wishes. Possibly that was the reason why a raid to Mt. Elgon was a complete disaster.

As I am departing to the spirits' land, I am brought to remember successive wars by our people, and also the Kipsigis.

War is bad by itself. The saying "war has no eyes" is true. The Kipsigis people had an organized war into the Kisii land.

They were happy to learn, after many spying missions, of the availability of many cattle whose security was poorly managed. Surely on arrival their thoughts were confirmed, as they found no resistance at all. They came back thanking their lucky stars while Tesonget, a survivor of the raid, was totally perturbed as to why there was no resistance. Never did they know that all their movements were thoroughly monitored by the Kisii warriors. For many years the Kipsigis had been a menace to the Kisii people, and a decisive war was well planned without the Kipsigis warriors knowing it. On their way, in the valley of Mogore, the Kipsigis warriors were ambushed. I tell you, this was the biggest disaster ever befalling a Kalenjin tribe. Blood flowed like water. Almost all warriors were massacred with the exception of a few who were lucky enough to escape. Being in a narrow valley, most Kipsigis warriors were closed in from front and behind and none could survive. Some of the Kipsigis survivors removed the intestines of their dead colleagues and placed them on their bellies so as to be seen as dead. But the Kisii warriors would not take a chance. They came around to make sure that the job had indeed been done. They used their spears on all bodies lying in the valley, both alive and dead. The test was easy. The bodies that did not cry, were dead. Those that

cried at the sight of the spears, were promptly put to rest. Yet some of the wounded Kipsigis warriors were lucky enough to escape death even in such narrow chances.

Late at night, when hyenas were settling to a meal, the few lucky survivors rose from the dead and proceeded homewards, full of wounds, to tell of the horrifying tales. That group included Tesonget. He had a wound between his throat and the collarbone, which he had stuffed with leaves to stop further bleeding. He survived because he had placed a whole digestive system from a departed neighbour on his own body. It is said that for a long time, there were no able young men to sire children and provide security in the Kipsigis land. A call of distress was sent to our land, the Nandiland, and soon a meeting was convened to deliberate on the pressing issue. Without any delay, a good number of our able married people were sent to provide the necessary services there. With their young families they departed. On arrival a meeting was convened between the Kipsigis aged elders and visitors. The issue was wife inheritance, but how?

The Kalenjin custom could not allow different “bloods” to intermingle.

Only those of the same “blood” could inherit the widows of their departed “blood” relatives. Clan customs played a very big role. Arap Sirng’ot and his wife Chebosawe were among those whom we sent. Their mission was to raise children for their departed clansmen. They had to have their own families. So they inherited those wives since they could not be their concubines but more of their own wives. That may be the beginning of the name Nandi from the word *Kindi*.³⁵ That is why there are many Nandi-Kipsigis people in Kipsigis land.

³⁵To inherit

Also some years ago, the same calamity had befallen our land after the Kavirondo raid which eliminated over four hundred men. At home were only boys and the aged. So the Kipsigis men were invited to do the needful services in our land. The Kipsigis young men were never accompanied by their families but they came and later on returned to their homes having left behind many off-springs.

Their major responsibility was to do the procreation part. So from the word *sigis*³⁶ they earned their name Kip-sigis.

10

Our journey continued southwards the following day with all vigour since we were looking forward to return to our homes. Before we descended to the plains of Kibortiet (present day Webuye), we had a clear picture of our destination. The sight was wonderful since we could see as far as the land of Pongomek without any obstruction.

From the plateau of Kamelil we took a good view of the land below us. Since we knew that the Maasai people inhabited the land, we decided against trespassing their territory. Our way forward was to travel south, away from the Kony Mountain before changing direction to southwest.

“The Maasai people are more conversant with security than many people and have spies all over. So we must be extra careful in our approach,” said Kipsongol, “Our presence should never be discovered by those people.”

Arap Sambai said, “The families of our relative clan, whom I mentioned, are not far from here. They will give us all the assistance that we need including useful information about the Maasai people,

³⁶To produce children

their herds, and security as a whole.” We were eagerly looking forward to meeting our new relatives.

11

Two days later, we had maneuvered our way through many difficulties. To begin with, we almost stumbled upon the Maasai warriors who were basking in the morning sunshine. They were in a joyful mood as their laughter indicated. Their concentration was below as they oversaw various activities taking place in their *manyattas*.³⁷ We were very fortunate, as no one detected our presence. For a good length of time, we watched them. What attracted our attention most was how they looked like. They all were lean and brown with all the qualities of athletes.

That told us that they frequently did exercises, like throwing spears, swords and clubs. Above all, they looked very strong and aggressive, as they talked with their weapons in their hands.

After a lengthy discussion, they strolled towards their *manyattas*. We stayed put as we watched the activities below. The centre of our interest was mainly cattle and their security. We knew that they had acquired their cattle by massacring our people. The animals before us were ours by right. We renewed our determination to re-claim from the Maasai what was ours, even if it meant dying for its sake.

We felt a burning desire of retrieving our rightful wealth. We would either fight to own those splendid cows or die in the battle.

³⁷Low grass-thatched huts inhabited by many nomadic communities in Africa

At dusk, we moved towards their kraals as we watched in dismay all the activities. We saw men moving towards various directions as they prepared for the night security duties.

To our disbelief, about six of them came towards our direction and a short distance away they sat down in groups as they talked in low tones. They were about twenty steps away. But they could not see us. At any rate, our determination was stronger than their presence.

As darkness overshadowed the land, we made plans of approaching their kraals secretly. To speak the truth, it was nearly impossible to do so because of their security men who were all over. The process needed slyness of the highest degree. The operation was risky in that it could result in death. But we had to do it. That meant that the job at hand needed a most disciplined person who was ready to employ all his qualifications.

After a brief whispered discussion, I was picked to assume that awesome responsibility in which I believe most of my friends would have showed their backs. No sane man could offer to undertake that mission unless he had a lion's heart and hare's knowledge. That responsibility rested squarely on my shoulders. For a long time, I said nothing as I weighed the assignment before me. It was risky, but of course I had to do it.

All that I did was to leave behind everything I had including my garments except my belt that supported a sword. So, in that naked state I shuffled on all fours having noted the tall tree under which my colleagues were seated praying for the best. As fast as a chameleon I moved forward. For a long range of time, I made the most bizarre journey forward.

I bypassed the security men a short distance as I could see them grouped in one place unaware of a grotesque motion before

them. I heard them talking in low whispers. Having moved for what appeared like eternity, I came to the nearest kraal. For a long time I watched the gate that I had noted before. Nothing happened. As I prepared to approach the kraal, I saw a movement. Somebody had been seated concealed all along, possibly the gatekeeper. That saved me or else I would have walked into my death. What assisted me most was the position I had assumed. After watching for a good length of time and to my horror I found that he was not alone, as he had earlier appeared. Another man stood and stretched himself possibly after squatting for a long time.

My heart was pounding as I realised that I was in serious danger. For an endless length of time I lay prostrate there, resting my chin on hard ground. One of my knees was resting on a stone that left it throbbing with pain.

However, that was not the end. One of the security men moved forward in my direction. I thought that that was to be the end of my life, as I know that he was armed with a spear. As he neared he stopped undecided before planting his spear into the ground as he prepared to relieve himself. Had he moved three to four steps forward he would have stepped on me. It chilled my blood to think of what would have happened. Fortunately, for me it was extremely dark there at that time.

Having achieved his purpose, the Maasai retreated to his post where he conversed with his partner for a long time. Finally, they shifted to another darkened position, which gave me my chance to continue with my dangerous spying mission. Having gone round the fence, I found a small opening that allowed me to enter it. For a long time, nothing moved. But when I was planning the next move, a man coughed among the herds. I knew that he was not alone but had company.

As silently as I had entered, I slipped away, and retreated swiftly towards my friends. As I approached, to my horror I saw the Maasai security men moving towards their direction. They passed by the site as they probably moved to another station. I expected a war cry, knowing the parties would not embrace one another with love, but with death. I waited for the unexpected.

What was troubling my mates was why I had taken so much time. They were worried about my safety thinking that somebody might have slipped a spear into my heart.

They had watched those security men moving towards their direction, and had slipped undetected to a safer place. Of course they kept an eye on the area under the tree and my re-appearance was a relief.

Having reunited, we moved to a safe distance where we waited patiently for dawn as we prepared to do a further investigation of the Maasai people. However, none spoke at all as our security was at stake.

As the early birds sang in yet another day, we made a speedy retreat to a forested area where, to our relief, we found a good hideout. There I told my friends the discoveries I made with a strong emphasis on the security men.

At mid-morning two warriors were sent to further spy on the Maasai. They came back later with the very disturbing news that the Maasai warriors were many and well armed.

Since we had nothing much to do we looked for food as well as where to rest for the night.

Early the next day we moved fast southwards determined to reach Maraba. We hoped we would join our kinsmen there. At noon

we were lucky to identify a flock of birds ascending and descending in their flight at a particular place. Our experience had taught us that such an occurrence manifests a wild creature. As we approached we saw monkeys up the trees chattering in the low tones as if scolding whatever was below. Kibiwott approached the area of attraction after ascertaining the direction of the wind.

He later came back hastily with the information that under the tree was a huge python that was swallowing a monkey. Personally, I hate all reptiles, and especially pythons.

There is a story of a mother who was harvesting millet. A short distance away was her young baby of about a year old and a maid of about five years. A python approached and before long it had squeezed the toddler to death. As it swallowed the child, the maid called out, "Mother, it is swallowing". The mother replied, "Let it swallow because I cooked it." The mother thought the baby was swallowing the food they had carried for lunch. For several times the young maid called her mother that it was being finished without mentioning the reptile and the baby. By the time the mother learnt the horrid truth, the baby was resting in peace in the python's belly. Of course the reptile was satisfied. It never paid any attention to a mother's wailing.

12

Four days later, after crossing lower Kibor, we arrived at the homestead of our kinsmen, but about two hundred steps away we stayed hidden in a bush. We could not approach that home because it was already dusk. We did not want to be mistaken for thieves, as we were not expected.

The night was unbearable as it was extremely cold. We were on a rather flat ground. In our sitting position our knuckles and other

body joints protested in pain as we had curled ourselves with our faces resting on our knees. Our hearty hopes of getting a re-union with our kinsmen appeared to be shattered

The night was the longest and we wondered if we would even see the next day. My body was totally numb while my spirit was at its lowest. We were asking ourselves why fate had led us to die at the door of our consolation. Had any wild beast attacked us then, we would not have raised any defence or called for assistance. Finally, out of fatigue we slept in that position.

The early birds woke us up, and surely it was wonderful as we greeted a new dawn. I stretched my limbs as if to satisfy myself that I was still alive.

As the sun rose, our spirits were uplifted as we watched delightfully the activities in the homestead below. We saw young men awakening amidst their herds. For security purposes, they had to sleep with their animals. Finally, we saw an aged elder who greeted the day as our fathers do at home. The homestead's compound was protected with a strong fence.

We watched cows being milked by women, and later as the day became warmer, the herdsmen led their animals towards grazing grounds.

For one full hour we watched the homestead. Later, as we were planning our next move, the aged elder came out of the gate towards our direction but we were hidden in the bush.

Later, as he was returning homewards, Arap Sambai approached him and at short distance away he cleared his throat to draw attention of the elder. From a distance, he greeted him:

*“Chamgei kuugo”*³⁸

“Chamgei,” and who are you?”

“I am Arap Sambai, son of Kap Seurei, from the division of Kapchepkendi in Nandi.

They embraced one another as the old man shed tears of joy. They talked for some time in whispers. They later joined us, and our joy at meeting a welcoming party was beyond our expectations. We had lived in the wild and had never hoped to be confronted with such a mild situation. I could not help shedding tears of joy and gratitude.

We hailed Arap Chebwai, the aged elder, with great respect and almost worshipped him as our god and saviour. He led us to a more protected jungle. Without saying anything more, he left as fast as his aged bones could carry him.

A short time later he hobbled back leading his two sons who were carrying four calabashes of milk hidden in their garments. After the general greetings, we drank the good milk from the containers. We could drink only a little as our stomachs, due to famine, had shrivelled. Having drunk the milk, we briefed him of the news about home although we had been away for four months. He was so happy by meeting us that he had more questions to ask than we could answer. He wanted to know of his relatives and friends at home, especially his age-mates. He knew them name-by-name, and the various experiences they had undergone together. He was encouraged to know those who were still alive, and discouraged to learn of those of his close associates that had departed.

³⁸Greetings, Grandfather!

Finally, the young men left carrying the empty containers. Our aged elder remained behind to listen to our mission, which Kipsongol briefed him on. He remained nodding his head in great keenness showing all signs of understanding. His earrings danced as he nodded his head in agreement.

A couple of hours later, the young men came back. They brought for us the best meal ever. It was composed of roasted and boiled meat, some soup and a bowl of blood. It was a wonderful meal that we ate to our satisfaction and to the delight of our host.

We thanked our host for his great hospitality. After that wonderful meal, we asked him to let us rest, as we had not slept well the previous night. He granted our request, and promised to avail security for us. Before he had gone far, we were already asleep. We slept peacefully without any care in the world.

Late in the evening, we awoke. To our delight, we found two other young men, the eldest sons of our host. We were encouraged by their desire to meet us and especially their friendly love.

We were happy to meet them as we had heard of their names back at home. We talked at length but avoiding discussing our mission as much as we could. We learnt from them of their small community as we compared it with ours. We also came to know that there were other Nandi families living with them. Most important, we learnt that the relationship between them and their *Pongomek* cousins was perfect.

Why had our hosts kept us in the bush, instead of inviting us into their homestead? This was mainly because of security reasons. Their neighbours could not be trusted to keep secrets. So we had to remain hidden at all times.

As dusk fell, we were escorted secretly to one of the huts where a welcome fire had been made for us. But having lived in the wilderness for all those months, especially in the cold, that small hut was too hot for us. We continued to talk with our age-mates, as they removed some burning wood to make the heat pleasant enough.

Later, we were provided with supper of hard porridge from millet flour, fermented milk, soup and lots of meat. We ate to our satisfaction.

We slept well that night. And for the first time I had a dream about home. In it, I saw my sweetheart, Chesondin, being given away in marriage to another man. She was bitterly complaining and struggling to make herself free, but Kimagut, the son of Kimaget was too strong for her. After a long struggle, she called me to rescue her. I darted forward with my unsheathed sword. But before I could do anything, I heard someone calling in a loud voice.... I woke up with a start as someone was calling us from outside.

The caller was our host. After enquiring of our well being, and whether we had slept well, he advised us to leave for our previous hideout as dawn was approaching. On arrival, we could not speak much as we were preoccupied with personal thoughts. I kept on remembering my dream. I kept on telling myself that it was only a dream. But I failed to put my heart at ease. Though circumcision festivals had been postponed because of our spying mission, I was worried. A mature girl like Chesondin could be forcefully circumcised and married to someone else.

Finally, as I could not control my thoughts, I decided to confide with my friend, Kipsugut, in a whisper. "Do you think girls' circumcision has taken place at home?"

"That has been my biggest problem," he said. "It may have taken place, but I doubt it. The seers could not agree to it because of our absence from home. Surely they should wait for us."

“If I find her married off, I’ll not forgive our people. Furthermore, I will never undertake any venture on behalf of the community. What is the use of risking our lives when things are done behind our backs?” I moaned as I shook my head. I felt a great heartache.

Finally, the sun rose and we were cheered to feel its warmth.

We were brought back to the reality as our breakfast of fresh warm milk was brought in calabashes. We enjoyed it as the containers passed from mouth to mouth.

As our breakfast ended, we were joined by a group of elders who approached our hideout from different directions in cautious movements. For a long time, they enquired of many things about life back at home. I was glad to meet some of my clansmen of Kipkenda.

At the end of the general discussion, an elder of Kapmaraba said, “At long last we have seen you. A bird told me of your coming some days ago. I have been in a state of anticipation. We need to hear of your mission and the welfare of our people at home.” He paused.

Kipsongol, our guide, who was a very good orator, talked at length about our mission and our journey all the way through, including our risks and courage. He concluded by saying, “The young men before you are real men and I am convinced that in them the Nandi have justly invested their hopes.”

“So your mission is to spy in anticipation of a cattle raid. Is that not so?”

“Yes,” Arap Sambai answered.

“If the Nandi would like to have their cattle back, it is good news. Time has come when these *Kamoriongek* should be taught a lesson once for all. They should not be allowed to prosper with our cattle. Whenever I hear of their boasting, I ask myself whether men still exist in our land. I am very proud of what you are doing.” An elder said.

Another elder added, “Let me give you some knowledge of the *Kamoriongek* people. These days there are marriages between them and us, the *Pongomek* people. A new crossbreed is developing. Also among us the Nandi, we have intermarried with the Maasai people and that is why your presence must be concealed. They have spies among us.

Yes, they have cattle but one should not forget that they have the real Maasai blood. They are still the same people against whom our elders waged many wars. Their defence has improved after learning the use of arrows as the indigenous people. So when planning to raid these people, you should know that their weaponry is as good as yours.”

“For several years we have spied on these people and have found that their security is almost impenetrable,” one of the elders contributed. “We have our sons employed by them and so they continue to update us with the relevant information about their security. We know all their movements. Our sons understand and speak their language, and even behave like them. So nothing has escaped their ears. To the Maasai, they are like their adopted sons.”

“I suggest that we call one of our sons so that he may assist you with useful information.

For many hours we talked about our mission.

The elders later talked about our relationship with the Maasai people and the rest of the tribes around them. “Our relationship with the Maasai people has been deadly,” one of the elders observed.

“Our people waged many wars with them in many places like Chepterwai, an area which was left littered with the bones of our enemies. But we also lost many of our own warriors.” An elder observed, as he wiped tears that were flowing freely. He might have remembered a relative or friend that perished in that war.

“The good news is that they are no longer a menace to our people. After that decisive war at Ol’Lessos, those people were handed a final defeat. It left them like hungry hyenas. So you see, they have also lost many animals as well as men,” an elder contributed excitedly. He was a man of war who enjoyed prowling with spears and swords during his warriorship.

“It is good that at last we are encouraged to learn that these useless fellows will be visited soon,” Arap Chebwai said. “It is time they were put in their place. They should not be allowed to enjoy their lives while our children are dying of hunger. We need real men who are ready to restore our lost glory. We wish you success in your mission.”

“As you have heard, our sons are in their midst as their herdsmen. You should know that we loaned our sons to them purposely.” Another elder said, nodding his head knowingly. “The Kamoriongek even don’t know that their herdsmen are Nandi. We have all the information you require. I advise that one of the young men should accompany you home with some others. He will be of great assistance to you during your journey.”

“The rest of the Nandi herds-boys in the Maasai land will be forewarned in advance of the impending raid. When the time comes, they should keep away from the fighting places. The return journey

after the raid will take the eastward route. That will fool them into thinking that their attackers are the Pokot. That way, our sons will be safe in their land and it will also ensure our own safety.”

“And that is one of the reasons why these Pongomek people should not know of your presence here.” An elder said. “We have lived peacefully with them for many years and have waged many wars with them. Because of their relationship with the Maasai, they could easily sell us if they come to suspect of what is going on now. However, we are sure of one thing. Our cousins, the Pongomek, will protect us, in case we are attacked by the Maasai. In case Pongomek warriors are invited to give chase after the raid we will also contribute men to support them.”

“I suggest that this attack is effected in the shadow of the dusk. It should be a lightning attack leaving the Maasai devastated. By the time they will get organized you will have gone far.” An elder said as he prepared a snuff to soothe his nerves. The veins were protruding on his face to show his nervousness. He sneezed loudly after the snuff. “You will travel the whole night leading the animals. The men who will accompany you know the route as far as Cherangany.”

“Now, now, elders, at least we are getting somewhere,” an elder said excitedly. “I agree with what has been said. The raid should take place an hour before dusk. Our warriors must be as quick as lightening. So before the enemy knows what actually happened, our men will be miles away. They will be left counting their losses and assisting the injured before even thinking of pursuing their attackers. By the time they are ready to give chase, it will already be dark. The darkness will frustrate their plans and by morning you will have crossed many places.”

The meeting ended late in the evening.

For three days, we did nothing except resting and regaining our strength. We also visited many homesteads discretely, where we made several friends. We shared many things through our discussions, as our hosts were very opened to us. We learnt of their security as a whole. We felt that we were ready for action now.

On the fourth day we received a wonderful young man. We doubted if he really was Nandi as he was completely a Maasai in appearance. At first, I was suspicious of him thinking that he was an enemy spy. But our main host introduced him to us. We had also the elders and others who had travelled all the way beyond Maraba. During our discussion with the elders, young men had been posted around to oversee our security.

We talked for many hours on various matters including our hosts' safety after the intended raids. Though they were rather intermingled with our distant cousins, the Pongomek, that alone could not be depended on. They had their weaknesses as well. So our hosts made a prompt decision to retreat further towards Kapkogong, which was actually a usual occurrence among the pastoral people. Other Nandi remnants lived there in a larger community. Together they would be peaceful.

The young man, Kibitok, who had come to visit us, educated us on the security of his employers, their strength and weaknesses. We learned more of their warriors, weaponry and more importantly, their animals. We had also to enquire of their usual movements as a pastoral people. The young man, known by the Maasai as Ole Surum, had not only mastered their language and behaviour, but also their movements the year round.

Kibitok had played his role as an excellent spy without the knowledge of the Maasai people. On most occasions, he told us that he castigated his own people and often fed his hosts with false information on the people of Nandi and their disintegration. That pleased the employers on learning that women were more powerful than men in the land.

More importantly, he informed them that men had long lost interest in war and had succumbed to poverty. The Maasai had already formed an opinion that their assailants of long ago had now lost their aggressiveness. So their security was rather relaxed.

Late in the afternoon, the consultation ended. Kibitok Ole Surum had to report promptly at his place of work.

He was to seek permission from his employers on the grounds that his people were moving further away towards the Nandi and he would have to accompany them. Also he told of his intention to marry and raise his own family. He was granted leave.

Before he left, he was showered with praises and blessings from the people he had served with dedication. As a reward for his faithful service, he was given four cows. He parted “sorrowfully” with the people he had known over many years.

Never would they know that the young man was actually sorrowful of what was to happen to them. All that Kibitok knew was that it would be wrong to lead warriors to that family which had blessed him with such gifts.

He arrived some days later, having made the necessary arrangements with our tribal warriors who had served with dedication as spies in the Maasai land. They had conceived a compromising link that they could advance all assistance possible

during and after the raids. Together with the elders we gave final touches to our preparation for war.

We were supplied with strong arms, food as well as clothing. Above all we were honoured to have five other young men who were to guide us on our homeward journey and later during the raids.

On the eve of our departure, the elders showered us with blessings. Prayers were offered to *Asis* for our protection. As the evening meeting came to an end we were embraced by the elders, especially our hosts. We also reciprocated by thanking them for their great hospitality and moral support that had enabled us to gain strength.

Our main host, Arap Chebwai, ensured that all our provisions were in order. Though he was old he took pains to supervise our preparations for departure. I was moved to tears as I saw an aged expert at work.

13

We traveled southward from Maraba³⁹ (the present day Malava) on the way to *Sieye*.⁴⁰ Our major concern was to avoid the forested areas that were highly inhabited by dangerous animals. Nothing much happened beyond our combined strength. Our journey was enriching and delightful. This was because our mission was at its ripe stage. We were happy to have new companions who were very resourceful with information. At the end of the day we had arrived at Kapkogong where we were blessed by finding a very

³⁹The present day Malaba

⁴⁰Kakamega

good cave that gave us good security over the night. We ate to our satisfaction since we had ample food in stock.

Early in the morning at sunrise, we were prepared to leave. As usual, we prayed. Indeed, throughout our mission prayers had played a central role in our life. We invoked the name of *Asis* more often than we did at home. We believed that the deity worshipped by our ancestors was ever present with us and knew that He answered our prayers. In times of difficulties and abundance, *Asis* was our guide. We could do nothing before seeking His guidance. Throughout our mission we had welcomed the shining glory of *Asis* given through *Asista*⁴¹ as we ceremoniously spat towards it as a sign of blessings and acceptances. Arap Sambai, our guide, could be heard pronouncing the name of *Asis* frequently for our protection as we stretched our open palms towards it in a kneeling position. So we knew of God and his wonderful powers.

We continued with our journey. We arrived at Chombiro late in the afternoon before proceeding towards Kapng'etuny.

Several days later we had bypassed Ketip-Kipeles on our way to Kapsus-swai. Then onwards we were quite familiar with the area and so began to feel relaxed. We passed through Chepnego, Chepchuru, and finally arrived at *Kai-mos*⁴² where we found our colleagues in one of our outposts. We fell into their arms as we reunited with them after such a long absence. They were happy to see us all alive. We stayed with them for a day as we shared our sorrows and blessings about our mission. Now that we were already at home, we felt a great peace of mind.

We later continued towards Serem where we found other warriors at an outpost there as they were anticipating our arrival

⁴¹The rising sun

⁴²Present day Kaimosi

with a lot of anxiety as word had gone before us. There I met some of my close friends like Kipkogei who was also my cousin.

As I hugged him, I could not control shedding tears of joy onto his shoulders. In the company of these warriors we rested as we received news of home. The news gave us the encouragement that all was well at home.

Also we came to learn that the *Orkoiyot*⁴³ had foreseen our safe arrival. People at home were full of joy, as various preparations had been made to welcome us home.

14

Ariri-ri ri ri ri! Kongoi lagokyok! ⁴⁴

Ariri-ri ri ri ri ri! Kongoi murenik! ⁴⁵

It was wonderful to hear the ululation as mothers learnt of our arrival. People of all description surged forward to receive us. Our relatives and friends embraced us, something, which I will never forget in my life. Of course, in our midst were our faithful girlfriends that could not hide their ecstasy on seeing us after such a long absence. It was the greatest moment for me as I greeted my beloved, Chesondin.

In unity, we stepped into a wonderful *Kambakta* dance that signified the success of our mission. Though we all were good dancers, none could match the guides who had come with us. Kibitok who had lived among the Maasai people could not hide his excitement as he jumped up higher and higher. For about two hours we sang

⁴³Chief Elder

⁴⁴Thank ye, our children! (A tribal ululation of welcome to be repeated twice)

⁴⁵Thank ye our warriors! (A tribal ululation of welcome to be repeated twice)

and danced gracefully in a circle. Much later, after the excitement had somehow abated, we were asked to sit on the ground. Blessings followed led by the tribal patriarch, Telenges, and others. The names of *Asis* and the ancestors were invoked frequently as thanks were offered to them. After women and children had been sent away, the news of our mission was divulged. Arap Sambai talked at length about our journey since we left home five months ago. Heads were nodded while earrings danced as satisfied faces could be seen shining with the best news ever. Some were shedding tears of joy. The young could be heard clucking their tongues as the wealth of the Maasai people was mentioned. They hoped to share in this wealth soon. We discussed war with our hearts pounding in excitement. Our hosts from the land of Pongomek had provided each of us with a *Kutwet*⁴⁶ made of lions' manes and ostrich feathers. So we looked different from the rest at that time. We were worthy of that reception.

Kibitok, the former Maasai herdsmen, supplemented the information with his own elaboration of the Nandi remnants and their neighbours. He introduced the other five emissaries as a testimony that prosperity has lived with them. His mission to the Maasai people was the most valuable. He told of their behaviour, their security and above all their wealth, the animals.

There was great excitement in the air.

After the gathering had received the good news, Telenges stood up. After restoring order, he began, "Elders and warriors, we have received our men who have accomplished a successful mission on our behalf. They have almost sacrificed their lives so that our people may have something to eat and boast of. What I have seen is that in our midst are real men who are still courageous and dependable." He paused to check whether his words of wisdom were sinking in our minds.

⁴⁶Warrior's headgear

He continued, “We honour them. Much more, we honour Arap Chebwai, our elder, who not only provided hospitality but also did good groundwork for our sake. He knew of our ambitions much earlier, as the bird had shown him, and had sent Kibitok to spy on those Kamoriongek. We are indeed happy that all his plans and wishes will be achieved soon. It is you, our men, who will make his plans a reality. If you are not ready, our women will do so and the land will curse you forever. Who would want to live with cowards? Our Nandi people have never been cowards since time immemorial. The clans of Kapchepkendi and Kaptalam, who are represented by the spies in our midst, will become a laughing stock for many generations if you fail to implement that which has been planned for you. This massive exercise requires the unity of both clans. We know the Kamoriongek, their defence, and speed in war and so we should not make it a child’s play by sending only a few men against them.

Our elders have said, “*ongiomechi poton kelok*.”⁴⁷ If *Kaptalam* are not ready to provide a strong unity with us, we will do it alone.” He ended his speech. Others took over. We were heaped with praises. If the praises were solid, they could have formed a mountain! At the end of the meeting, we were already being viewed as worthy leaders. We were asked to kneel before the elders.

After the usual blessings and prayers to Asis from Telenges, saliva was ceremoniously spat onto our faces, chests and hands that were already opened to receive them. An elder’s saliva was the greatest blessing. Surely I was honoured beyond my expectation. My elevation took a significant turn as I was now called a warrior and no longer “a boy”.

⁴⁷Let us put our trembling legs together, and we shall obtain support one from the other.

At that time I learnt that social elevation comes only after succeeding in doing something for the sake of the community. Surely, after all those risks in the wilderness, I felt that I had rightfully earned my promotion.

We were led to our homes for various receptions that had been prepared for us. There was acceptance all over, as we took our respective positions in the land. As worthy leaders, we now commanded authority.

15

The whole community now started planning for the raid. Cattle raids activity formed an important part of our social life. A seed had been planted into every warrior's mind. We, young men, were especially anxious to own our cattle through our own efforts. Those unworthy Kamoriongek had no right to enjoy our fathers' labour while we were languishing in poverty. We were so bitter. Not only had the Maasai taken away our cattle, but had also killed our people.

Our major interest was not to avenge the evil, but to retrieve what belonged to us by right. Sometimes, we did ask ourselves: to what extent were the cattle really ours? But we did not care much to answer this question.

Quite often, I ask myself whether it was worthwhile to do all those evil things just to gain prestige in the land. But then, I reminded myself that it was part of the normal activities in the community. There was no other way to gain prestige in the land. Apart from providing an opportunity to gain wealth, cattle-raiding also provided us with a man's sport where we could demonstrate our courage. Finally, we found cattle-raiding necessary as means to survive as it afforded as cattle.

16

The elders and the warriors were now preoccupied with one prime concern—to make our land rich and prestigious.

For many days after the meeting, the elders discussed our preparations. The *Maotik*⁴⁸ were present at many meetings. They gave their expert opinions. Finally, a team of six seers led by Arap Sirtoet and other elders, was selected to be the tribal emissary to the *Orkoiyot*⁴⁹ to receive a divination. They went leading a heifer and an ox as an offering to the Chief Elder. He was already anticipating their arrival, he told them.

After a full explanation of their mission, the Chief Elder gave a lengthy elaboration of his own divine powers. The elders listened intently as the Chief Elder told them of the powers conferred on him by the ancestors.

There was no immediate discussion of the main purpose of the visit. The elders were fully entertained before being shown where to rest for the night. Arap Sirtoet and another elder were asked to remain behind with the Chief Elder for more serious discussions. These elders further informed the Chief Elder on various observations they had carried out and their results.

Before meeting the Chief Elder, the elders had already obtained their own divination by gazing into the beer pot. This is how it was done. A pot full of beer was brought. Hot water was also brought. The water was poured onto the beer. Bubbles formed. Their movement was observed keenly. Nothing was said but the participants had read very satisfactory signs.

⁴⁸Tribal seers

⁴⁹Chief Elder

Early the next day, when the elders and the seers awoke, the chief elder was nowhere to be seen. He had gone out early before dawn to consult other spiritual intermediaries on the issue presented by the elders. Over the night he had talked with the ancestral spirits and had been instructed on what to do, and what to tell the elders.

He arrived after breakfast and told the emissaries, "I have made various observations and the information you gave me has been confirmed by the ancestors. Actually there are cattle in the two areas, but the Kamoriongek's cattle are the best of all. Those people are planning to join their southern brothers in the near future as I have been informed. But they are still waiting for an opening. So far they have not got permission to pass through Kavirondo and Kisii lands. They have many cattle. Therefore it will be right for our warriors to relieve them of some of their animals. This should be done as quickly as possible before the Maasai begin to migrate. My advice is that warriors must be prepared fully. Weapons, food and clothing should be made available to them before the next full moon."

In many words the *Orkoiyot* assured the elders that their sons would succeed if they would be disciplined. He further cautioned that the former employers of Kibitok must never be raided for the boy had eaten from their hands. So the kraal in question must be avoided to evade a curse that may cause a great abomination in our land. He reiterated that only disciplined and courageous men would be allowed to participate.

The elders thanked the *Orkoiyot* sincerely for his words of wisdom and blessings.

The next day we, the leaders, met with the elders at the warriors' hut. There the emissaries to chief elder briefed us on the results of their mission.

Arap Sirtoet, the tribal seer, stood and said, “Elders and warriors, greetings!” He repeated his greetings four times referring to cooking places, kraals, the aged women, and children to which we responded in unison, “Greetings!”

For a long time he was silent. Nobody spoke or sneezed. It was bad manners to whisper when an elder spoke. Such a thing indicated indiscipline. When an elder asked people to sit, he did not need to repeat his order. Everyone instantly obeyed. Their word could cause blessings or a curse. So when Arap Sirtoet stood to speak there was total silence.

“We have arrived from the mission. We have seen our Chief Elder and he has sent you greetings.” He fell silent for a long time as if he had forgotten what to say next. He was not in a hurry but wanted every word that he had said to sink into our minds.

“Our Chief Elder is a powerful man whose powers are beyond our understanding. He had even known of our visit long before we thought of visiting him. He was waiting for us on that particular day. He also knew of your spying mission all the way through and also that we have visitors in our midst. He knew that the spying mission was successful and he has praised those who participated in it for their disciplined and responsible behaviour. Through his known and unknown powers, he has told us all about our planned mission. He has told us that the Maasai have cattle but are preparing to migrate to join the rest in the south. He also feels that a raid be organised as soon as possible.

Therefore, he has consented to our planned mission. But as far as a raid to *the Irimetab Kapkwambisi*⁵⁰ is concerned, he is not quite sure of its success. His reason is that those people are our kinsmen and have never gone to war against us. He has asked that

⁵⁰The Kony land

men should be prepared fully and that before the next full moon the same elders should visit him again.”

We followed the speech with all attention as if our lives depended on it. And they did, for we were preparing a war knowing that war has no eyes. That was true. It meant life and death.

That day the elders made the selection of the most eligible men for the planned war.

17

Many activities were now put in motion. Weapons were ordered from blacksmiths around the villages. The weapons included spears, swords and arrows. Local experts crafted shields and bows. Each warrior had to prepare his own strong club.

Mothers had the responsibility of preparing *Kipook*⁵¹ from calves' skins. They were smoothened, sewn and oiled. They were supposed to be soft and durable.

Also there was the preparation of food. There were three ways of obtaining food. One, an elder, mostly a rich man, could be asked for *Koseet luget*.⁵² Two known misers were ordered to provide the same. Three, there was the communal responsibility where every family was supposed to contribute the necessities. Food items consisted of *Suatinik*,⁵³ honey, and millet. A *samburto*,⁵⁴ especially of a blameless couple, was identified where all contributions of food, the garments and the weapons were stored.

⁵¹Warriors' tunics

⁵²Provisions for war

⁵³Live herds

⁵⁴A storehouse for weapons, food and other provisions for war

All selected warriors were sent to a secluded area for preparations.

Once the foodstuff had been collected, the selected people were told to prepare the food. Most of those people were the worthless fellows around called *Sorik*. They worked under a blameless elder. Some of the animals, including oxen, goats and sheep were slaughtered. Their meat was cut into pieces and boiled in water. Some of the meat, soup and blood were given to warriors in their *eurto*.⁵⁵ Some of the boiled meat was later dried in the sun. When fully ready, the meat was mixed with honey and the compound was kept in bags made of skins. Millet was kept in calabashes for each warrior. Some of the animals were to be led alive.

At the seclusion area, we had to undergo discipline and strenuous exercises. We had to be distinguished marksmen in arrow-shooting, spear-throwing and club-fighting. We further had to practice defence, using shields. On many occasions, men had lost their lives, during these practice sessions, if they were careless. Some were injured or maimed. Above all, we had to do a lot of athletics. That part was necessary for two reasons: one, for escaping from enemies in case of a defeat; two, in case of success, we had to run fast for safety as well as driving away our loot. Another area that was necessary was wrestling, that is, facing the enemy without weapons. We practised in a lot of mock wars against ourselves. All those found weak, careless or undisciplined in one way, or another were excluded from the group. Others were beaten to improve on their weakness.

Our preparation therefore was not a simple exercise. It was full of torture and risks.

⁵⁵Seclusion area

Besides all those exercises, we were counselled by the elders. On many occasions we felt very discouraged as we were called “women.” A lot of nasty words were thrown at us by our trainers.

But we were well taken care of in terms of food. That was the only thing that raised our low spirits during those months of vigorous training. At times we could go for several days without food as part of our training in perseverance.

By the end of it all we had grown iron-muscles. We had known how to defend ourselves with arrows, spears, swords and powerful clubs. We were very good athletes and wrestlers. We were already the irons ready to face the fire.

Finally, our seers and elders revisited the *Orkoiyot* who on that occasion sanctioned the raid to *Kamoriongo*. The moon was high in the sky as we were ushered into war.

Our group included war veterans. Among us, warriors, were Arap Kitongo of Kapchekendi, Arap Sambai and Kipsongol who had led us during the last spying missions. But the most important man was Arap Chomu of Kaptalam.

18

Arap Chomu was a born winner. He was a *man* among men. To him, failing to achieve a well-planned venture was an abomination to the land. His commitment to his division’s or tribe’s affairs was of great importance. He was a wonderful spy, a warrior, a leader and a man of wisdom with great patience. Never have I seen such a man in my life fitting a full measure of his qualities.

He was a man of medium height, but very stout. His biceps were like rolls of tree-trunks that matched his broad shoulders and

muscular chest. Lifting weight equivalent to that of a fully-grown cow was nothing to him, as he was known all over for his strength. None could wrestle him for his right hand was as solid as a rock. He lived to a ripe old age when his skin would cling to his bones, and he would crawl instead of walking.

As a warrior, he could move other people to do what they never wanted to do, and come out with the best results. Often he had two persuasive ways. One, he was highly talented in eloquence. Although he spoke softly, he was always to the point. He could convince a hard-hearted man to change his mind through love, patience, sympathy and understanding. Two, he was powerful. The mere grip of his steely handshake could make one to wince in pain. When Arap Chomu used a stick as a corrective method, it could leave the defaulter with cracks on his body. He had no patience or sympathy for stubborn and arrogant fellows, or with people who wasted time. That's why all people feared his stick. But people feared his curse even worse. It was safer to face Arap Chomu's stick than be cursed with death up to the third generation.

Arap Chomu's great courage was known all over the land and that is why he was often chosen to perform the hazardous duties for the community. Enriching the land was his avowed ambition. Never did the *Pororiet*⁵⁶ of Kaptalam, had a man who was able to organize, plan and execute various successful cattle raids. During his leadership as a warrior, the division was most blessed with large herds of fat cattle and flocks of sheep and goats. This enabled young men to marry easily and people to have enough food in form of meat, milk and blood. The land was peaceful during Arap Chomu's warriorship.

⁵⁶A tribal division comprising several clans living in one place

However, even though he had waged many successful wars against enemies and wild animals, Arap Chomu was not without his own problems. At one time he was almost killed by a lion that had crept behind him. What saved him was his inborn alertness and vigilance. He managed to free himself from death by spearing the beast through its heart.

He was a decisive leader whose quick actions, on many occasions, saved many lives. One day, the Maasai warriors had encircled the Nandi warriors and were in the process of effecting a complete massacre. Arap Chomu, on realizing the grave situation, was forced to make emergency plans that would save them. Within no time he had grouped other leaders for an urgent consultation.

He had told them, "Warriors, this has become a matter of life and death. Our enemies are before us and behind us is this fast sweeping broad river. Already the cursed fellows have blocked our crossing point. Bad news is that these Kamoriongek are aware of our situation. May lightning strike them all." He shook his head as he came to realize that shedding blood was now inevitable but to the disadvantage of Arap Chomu and his warriors.

"But then what can we do?" One leader asked while almost throwing his weapons to the fast flowing river in a gesture of surrender. "I never knew that my end would come in this form," he lamented as he visualized a happy Maasai slaughtering him like an antelope.

Arap Chomu sprang at him and soon he was onto his neck, trying to squeeze out the already frightened life out of him. He had no patience for cowards. Had it not been for those around, Arap Chomu would have killed that warrior. And that would have been in order, for cowards were a bad company in war. For a long time no one spoke as death was approaching fast. Already they could hear

their bloodthirsty enemies. Between them was a thick thorn-thicket that prevented the two parties from meeting.

Arap Chomu said, "Even though our enemies are approaching, we cannot surrender. Yes, we will fight. Whether we surrender or fight, we shall die anyway. So let's die fighting instead of surrendering. That is the way of men. I have never had a sheep's heart and never will I." And as they talked in whispers a Maasai blew a horn that meant that they were ready to start the war. Their swords could be heard clearing the thorny barrier.

And as Arap Chomu was drowned in sorrow, especially for the young lives that were to perish in a foreign land, he saw a chimpanzee crossing the river. Already its life was in danger. For a long time, the ape fought a courageous war against the deep and fast waters in that broad river and finally after a long struggle reached a rock a short distance from the opposite bank. From that rock, it jumped to a strong branch and soon had survived death. But the chimpanzee had also revealed a great secret to our distressed party. All of a sudden they threw their spears and shields across and strapped the rest on their backs. Within no time they plunged into the river and after a long struggle, those who survived managed to reach the rock. Some were swept away, never to be seen again. Those who won the fight against the impossibilities had nothing to boast of for their bodies were full of bruises caused by rocks and hidden tree branches. The tactful way shown by the ape was bizarre but it saved them from their total destruction.

However *Asis* was with them. From the rock they managed to jump to the nearest branch as the chimpanzee had done.

Having crossed successfully, they thanked *Asis* for the provision that saved their lives. And as they collected their spears and shields, their enemies realized in dismay that their targets had vanished. They helplessly watched our warriors as they had merged with

vegetations across the river. Many of the Maasai warriors could not control shedding tears as some stopped from jumping into the river and drowning. They shook their heads in bewilderment and dismay. Whatever led to the escape, has remained a mystery to the Maasai to this day. Now that a lot of secret information about the Maasai had crossed the river, their herds and people were no longer safe. They knew that soon they would become the target of our raid and end up losing their wealth. And, sure enough, Arap Chomu was determined to claim the ancestral wealth stolen by the Maasai, which of course he later did. That is a story for another day.

In his old age, the elder Arap Chomu, was admired in the whole land. He was greatly respected as a man of the people. And surely, nothing could take place in the whole division without the blessings of Arap Chomu. Whenever he was invited for the elders' social gatherings none could drink the traditional beer, reserved only for the aged people, unless Arap Chomu had tasted it. And that is how he earned his name "Chomu" which means: "it tastes".

The name "Arap Chomu" has now withered through many seasons and generations. But from him came a courageous people, full of wisdom, love, understanding and lots of patience. People refer to them as children of another respected family, for they have formed a hard-working people that many would like to relate with, especially through marriage. Long live Arap Chomu!

CHAPTER THREE

We Laughed

1

The saying *Ma-amei ilat ket oeng*¹ is true. It gives hope to a downhearted man after a failure. Our warriors had earlier raided *Kavirondo*² and lost over four hundred of their own. Here is that story.

Our people had always distinguished between fishermen and herdsmen and could not see any reason why the fisher-folk Luo should own cattle instead of fish! The Luo could not be trusted to take care of the cattle, and therefore had no right to own them. So we had successfully raided the Luo several times to retrieve our rightful cattle from them.

Unfortunately, our faith in our own power was badly shattered at the Kavirondo raid, when the Luo taught us a lesson. This was because the Luo were more advanced in shield making than were other tribes around. The shields made by the Luo were very tall, up to five feet. During the Kavirondo raid, our men had shot and threw almost everything they had at these shields, only to find that they had not done much damage. Our astonished warriors were later

¹A tree is not struck twice by lightening

²The Luo tribe

rounded up and massacred. This horrid defeat caused trauma to our people for many years. But even though the Luo had defeated us during the Kavirondo raid, we did not lose heart. We later discovered their weakness. They did not have weapons apart from spears and clubs. We paid them another visit and this time we defeated them easily with the help of our spears and poisoned arrows. We massacred them and took away all their cows.

But our earlier defeat by the Luo had greatly reduced the number of our warriors. For many years we did not have men in the land, as most of us were then too young to sire children.

At long last we were ready to raid the Maasai and claim from them our cattle.

2

I still remember that early morning vividly since it was my first venture of this kind. Having collected all our requirements, we stood in three groups. The first was the *Ng'anymetiet* platoon composed of spies and security men. Their major responsibility involved surveying the route as well as safeguarding the middle group, the *Samburto*.³

The middle group was composed of elders and junior warriors. They had the duty of safeguarding the stores of food as well as *Suatinik*.⁴ This group was formed by a group of war veterans. Their other responsibility was that it acted as an advisory centre where all events were governed according to the regulations of war.

³Lit. A pot holding the small items of a family's household goods. This word was also used to refer to food-stores.

⁴Live herds

At both sides of this group were very courageous warriors called *Pirtik*. It was to further strengthen the security of Samburto from attacks by wild animals, mostly lions. Cows were in danger from wild cats.

Finally, The third group was the *Oldimdo*. It was composed of also courageous warriors whose duty was to provide security from the rear.

Early that morning at dawn, we were already in our groups waiting for the final word. We had all our provisions ready. That included food and weapons. Every warrior was to carry a spear, a shield, a bow, a quiver of arrows, a club and a pouch containing a mixture of meat and honey, millet, and *Ngoriet-ab kaboger*⁵. Elders could be seen walking from one group to another making a careful inspection of whether each warrior had the necessary provisions. Also every warrior wore thigh-bells.⁶ Nothing was said at all. At the end of the inspection a powerful Kudu horn was blown four times. Many things took place at a go. The ground trembled, the cowards fainted and forward we marched. We were men with all the qualities of lions and never once did we look behind. Our eyes gazed far ahead of us while our thoughts fixed at victory.

We first marched eastward and finally towards the western direction on our way to Serem.

For a long time our people at home, Kaptumek, watched a cloud of dust rising in the air as over five hundred people stamped the ground powerfully. Our feet could be heard from far away as if

⁵A war dress

⁶The noise made by these thigh-bells could scare the enemy and was therefore used as a war tactic. During spying missions and other secret movements these bells were kept muzzled. They would be un-muzzled during a lightening raid to startle and scare the enemy.

we were already at war. Going against the Maasai people was never simple. We knew them. Our fathers had faced them many times. We knew of their fighting prowess and experience. We knew that their love for herds superseded everything else, and that they would fight to the last man. But there we were, going against them. It was a matter of life and death. And we knew it.

By that evening, we camped at Serem for the night. We were the Nandi warriors only from the divisions of Kapchepkendi and Kaptalam. The rest of the warriors from other divisions had remained behind to provide security at home while others would work as herdsmen. Some were posted to various security stations.

While we were still there, Arap Kitongo a leader of Kapchepkendi clan told us more about our mission. “The *Kamoriongek*⁷ are not children when it comes to war. They are known for their strength and determination. Our fathers told us that all the way through, these people are spirited and very alert. They know how to use their spears, clubs, swords and shields more than any other people known. So you must be ready to prove your worth. As far as we know, they are powerful. With only a club’s throw, they can easily dispatch an elephant to death. So your hands must be firm when holding your shields when war broke out. But take heart. You are going against mere men and not ghosts or monsters. You have to make use of tact apart from swiftness and strength. You cannot defeat these people unless you are ready to employ the two requirements. Remember they have stolen a lot of our animals before and have also killed a lot of our people. We have fought many wars with them through several age-sets and time has now come when they should be taught a lesson once for all.”

“Our elder has told us many things about our mission and also I have something to say,” Arap Chomu the leader of Kaptalam said. “I believe that the Nandi land still has men, and you are the men to

⁷The Maasai

make our land prosperous and peaceful. The further away the Maasai are from us the better. The same people have massacred many of our people all the way through. They should be made now to swallow their own poison. But we have not been passive to their raids. Our fathers massacred them at Chemuswo leaving that place littered with many dead bodies. That is the meaning of Chemuswo, the place of dead bodies. From now on they should not be left to regain strength and should never regain that position of mastery over us.”

3

Early the next morning after prayers, we left towards *Kai-mos*,⁸ where we rested for a day. Our progress was slow for several reasons. One, we were leading live animals. And two, we did not want in any way to tire the warriors. Also we still had a lot of heavy food in our stocks. Nothing much happened on the way. At any rate, we were familiar with the area. Later we passed through Chepchuru, Chepnego and Kapsus-swai. There we rested for a couple of days as the area had plenty of grass for our animals. Life was very favourable to all of us.

We later bypassed Ketip Kipeles on our way to Kapng’etuny. Since we had left Serem, we found many of our people on the way who lived around those areas. On many occasions we were blessed with more animals to supplement what we already had. So we had more than enough to eat.

At Kapng’etuny we built a strong camp as we anticipated resting for a couple of days. We slaughtered two of our cattle and had a lot of food. At night we hoped for having a good rest but that was not to be. First, we heard lions roaring from afar. Later they

⁸The present day Kaimosi in Western Kenya

approached our camp. Possibly, they had picked the scent of our animals. But we were prepared for them. Before the night passed, we had slain two lions but had also lost three warriors in the process. We defended our animals to the best of our capability. For the whole of that night we struggled against the lions while they seemed determined to have a fair share of our cows. Life was a struggle, and we accepted it. A man had the responsibility to face the known and the unknown. But the lions were not our only problem. What we feared most were elephants, buffaloes and rhinos. We called these “the big three”. Fortunately, at that time they were far deep in Chesumei forest because of the drought.

The next day after solemnizing the last rites to our departed comrades, we continued with our journey. We later crossed many rivers and valleys. A day later we had passed through Chombiro on our way to Kapkogong and there we rested for a couple of days as we planned our further advancement.

A distance not far away was Chebwai inhabited by our kin’s family of Kapchebwai. We sent emissaries to inform him of our presence. He was ecstatic to receive us. So for a couple of days we stayed with them. He was very happy to be reunited with the warriors who had visited him on their way from spying missions. I was greatly encouraged to see his enthusiasm for our raiding expedition. He had actually been a warrior in his own time but now he was very old. He gave us his blessings and prayers.

Later we proceeded slowly to Kamobir where we laid the strategy for our further journey. Before us was *Maraba*⁹ where our people had been living but migrated at the presence of the Maasai at Kibortiet. During our last spying mission we had found many

Nandi people living there but were already on the move towards Kapkogong where they were to seek refuge.

At Kamobir we rested. Our spies were busy surveying our way ahead. They came back with the news that the big three animals including lions and other wild cats were still around, though moving further away. It was during that time that many warriors were attacked by a strong bout of malaria. A lot of herbal medicine was prepared for them though their improvement was very slow. A good number of our animals were slaughtered to feed the sick and the rest of the company. For several days, we were bogged down by the disease that weakened us considerably. We were already anticipating the worst, as one after another was attacked. At that time, when our hopes became low, a suggestion was made. We had to move further away from the site. We carried our sick friends, and finally arrived at Maraba. But we were very tired, and our colleagues were still sick. Fortunately, they recovered later.

Between us and *Kirbotiet*¹⁰ was the area commonly known as *Ruandet*¹¹—later known as Lwandete—and river Nzoia or Kiborom. There the Maasai had temporarily occupied the area after being chased away from Ol'Lessos in Nandi.

⁹The present day Malaba on the Kenya-Uganda border

¹⁰The present day Webuye in Western Kenya

¹¹Rock

There we made several plans. To begin with, our *segeik*¹² had to be sent to collect more information.

Kibitok, the Maasai herdsman, myself, and most of those who had participated in the spying mission were once more honoured with the responsibility of the spying mission. Our responsibility was to search, identify and evaluate, and later report to the warriors back at the camp.

The twelve of us left early in the morning and by the evening we had arrived at Ruandet a short distance from Nzoia River. We rested for the night. We crossed the river the next day.

Kibitok knew the area well as he had traversed it with the Maasai herdsman on many occasions. What surprised him most was that a water point he knew had not been used for a long time. This was the most devastating information.

By late in the afternoon we came to the Maasai *manyattas*,¹³ but to our dismay, we found only ruins and dried cow-dung. This meant that the Maasai had left immediately after Kibitok resigned his post as their herdsman. Possibly the spirits of their ancestors had forewarned them and led them to a safer distance. Kibitok had been certain that those people were to remain there for a couple of months as they had told him. According to him, they were not in a hurry to leave, as there was a lot of grass in that area.

We wandered for several hours to locate their presence but our hopes were dashed by the strong winds from the plains below.

¹²Spies

¹³Low, grass-thatched, huts inhabited by nomadic people in many parts of Africa

Our failure to spot the Maasai after all this way was very disheartening.

Our target had mysteriously disappeared into thin air. There was no sign of any herds, not even a bony lamb. We began to feel that our great mission was going to be a failure. With heavy hearts, we returned to the camp.

Our report disappointed our colleagues, but it also fuelled their determination to move on. "At last we have realised that our target has vanished like the spirits," Arap Kitongo said. "What we must remember that these people are nomads who are on a constant search for pasture. Therefore, we must not lose hope but continue sending more warriors to spy. I am sure that they could not have gone far."

But that was not to be. The search later on cost us a lot of torture and many lives. The people had gone much farther than we had thought. "I propose that we send three spying missions. One, towards the mountain, another to the East and a third to the West." One leader suggested.

"Arap Kitongo, our leader, has talked well," said Arap Chomu. "I agree that we must send more spies." So we formed various parties entrusted with the responsibilities ahead. Three spying parties were organised. These were to be led by people who knew the area well. One party to the west was to be led by Kibitok.

The mountain party was to be led by Kibet and the eastern party by Kiptum. The latter two were the sons of Kapchebwai who accompanied us home after the last spying mission. I joined the eastern group.

Early the next day after the usual prayers we embarked on the missions before us. As the sun rose, we were already far from the camp. We crossed the *Ruandet*¹⁴ region and late in the evening we had crossed Nzoia. We spent a night together before the parties split towards various directions.

The northbound party took the mountain direction. The parties promised one another to meet the latest in three days. Each party had their own share of provisions, especially food and weapons. We knew so many obstacles, and especially wild animals that were numerous along the hills and towards the mountain. Each party had an equal number of twelve men.

For the whole of that day nothing much happened to our party. We moved slowly and cautiously through many ridges in all directions. At the end of the day we had not gone far. Late in the evening, we found a spacious cave known to our guides where we slept peacefully.

The second day was the most unfortunate time of our spying work. As usual, we had woken up early and had our morning prayers to our ancestors and Asis for protection. During the night before, we had heard a lot of trumpeting elephants as they moved in search of food. It was almost at noon when the most unfortunate catastrophe befell us. Kiptum had climbed up one of the trees to survey our journey and security ahead. He saw a movement on the ground nearby. As he was still perturbed by what it was, all of a sudden emerged a herd of buffaloes moving towards our direction. He did not have much but to warn us loudly of an impending death. A buffalo is the most sensitive animal I ever saw in my life. On learning of our presence they became deadly ferocious.

¹⁴The present day Lwandete

As quickly as we could, we scrambled up the trees at great speed, but one of us was too unfortunate to be swift enough.

As he was trying to reach the first branch of a tall and slender tree, the unexpected happened. One of the bulls gave the tree a strong shake that forced our friend to lose balance and tumble down. He landed directly on the buffalo's sharp horns. Up to now I cannot forget the deafening cry that came from him before he was thrown down and stampeded to death. We watched the passing away of our friend. It was a cruel death. We could not even defend him as our lives were at stake. Furthermore, we had left all our provisions scattered down below. Though we were safe up the trees, we were aware of one thing—the animals could camp below even for several days! That had happened before. We had not carried much up the trees except quivers of arrows and swords. Below us were the mad animals and the dismembered body of our comrade.

Having made their kill, the beasts moved chaotically, bellowing as they destroyed the bushes around to hound out their invaders. Having combed the area to their satisfaction, they joined in a dance of victory. With their tails up in the air, they danced towards a stream where they settled to quench their thirst. The buffaloes' movement had raised a cloud of dust. For some time, it was nearly impossible to see anything below.

While we were still dazed by what had happened in the past few minutes, a group of hyenas appeared from nowhere and descended on the scattered carcass of our late friend. We watched helplessly as hyenas fought over parts littered on the ground. One settled below me as it cleaned the head of our hero, leaving only the bare skull.

Anyway, it was a long time after the hyenas had gone that we descended, collected some of our other provisions and disappeared towards the opposite direction. Buffaloes are very destructive beasts.

As our spirits were down by the events related to the demise of our colleague, we did not have much to do. Furthermore, we had not gone far from our previous hideout. After walking some distance, we waited patiently for the dusk to come, as we were badly disturbed. All along, we were silent, as each pondered the risky part of our mission. Already we had lost four men, and the war had not yet begun! We munched in silence the food we had carried, and worried about the future. We talked in whispers of our next move and how to take precautions.

“What is the next move?” One of us asked sorrowfully. Already he had despaired as Kipsongol shook his head. He was incapable of speech. He was totally upset by the past incident. He had never seen death so close before. He was horrified by even the thought of the next move and was completely honest when he said, “I don’t know”.

He had begun to doubt whether it was really worthwhile to procure cows through cattle-raids.

“It might be better if we had stayed at home.” A warrior sighed as he thought of the risky escapades ahead of us.

“Drinking milk is not like owning a cow.” Kiptum said. He could not see why those before him were bickering as if they had been grabbed away from their mothers. He had lived among the Maasai. These amateurs! He eyed them wondering what prompted their participation.

“Do you know what a Maasai is made of?” He asked, “If you have a woman’s heart, you better go back now. A Maasai is made of iron and knows his job well.” He wondered how those people were to fight the war properly with all that fright arising out of the death of an individual, before even the decisive war began.

He fell silent. For a long time, no one spoke.

Kiptum was on the verge of fainting as he observed those whom he had been entrusted to lead. He was astonished that even courageous people could not withstand the passing away of a comrade while they were planning to kill other human beings in the pursuit of prosperity.

“It is not that we are cowards,” I said, “but the gruesome death of our departed comrade has shaken our nerves. This incident will give us many sleepless nights. In fact I am so much tortured by the vision of Kiprop’s dead face with his sightless eyes staring at me, before the hyena parted his jaws.”

“To me that is nothing.” Kiptum said, “He has gone as a warrior goes in war. Whether you die at home, or in war, death is death. There is no need to have your minds occupied with it. You may not know it, but I have seen many of such cases in my life. Let me tell you a true story.

6

We opened our eyes and ears while our friend talked of death as if it was his twin brother.

“We were about five and had gone on a cattle raid with the Maasai warriors,” began our friend, “And that was my first time to see death face to face. It was fortunate that we stumbled upon some enemy warriors who were tending their herds near a certain river. They were many, but their animals were too appealing. We had to take our equal share from these herds.

“Before then, we had wandered for many months in the dangerous wilderness. In fact we had lost over twenty men in

many grisly ways. Some were killed by buffaloes as was our friend Kiprop, while others by lions and reptiles. Some were swept away by fast-moving waters, while others died of hunger.

“For a long time we watched those people as they happily watered their animals. We had positioned ourselves across that broad river with our eyes alert. Finally, we realised that they were nothing compared to our experience. They were so relaxed as if nobody would ever steal their cattle. Just imagine some had only sticks and nothing else.

“We watched their activities with interest. Some had left their weapons scattered as they drank water like animals. That was their biggest mistake. We noted solemnly that such people were not fit to be herdsman.

“As they left, we slid into the water like crocodiles and for a long time, we watched them from water. We made a good survey, as leeches and their relatives sucked our blood underwater. We could also feel the odd fish swimming around our feet as they enjoyed a bite here and there. But nothing could distract our attention.

“After some time, we emerged out of that cold water hissing and shivering. Suddenly, out of nowhere, they were before us. But our red dyed and well-oiled garments confounded those men and left them with their mouths wide open.

“As they felt overcome by us, they knelt down in prayer. One man was not so submissive. He wanted to attack us and defend his colleagues. He threw a club at me, which missed me narrowly.

“He was huge and had somehow escaped our surveillance. He was actually a legend among his people. When he moved

forwarded it appeared as if even the earth shook. He was truly a man of war. He shook in rage and soon all those whom we had assumed as nothing became hostile. How they gathered their weapons within no time has remained as a mystery to me. We had expected an easy job, but before us was a group of warriors, ready for war. However, we proved to be faster than they.

“Like lightning, I aimed at him a strong arrow. As he poised his spear, I released the arrow, which hit his chest with a mighty thud, breaking his chest bones. The impact of the arrow almost lifted him in the air and crashed heavily on the ground to a sitting position. Once more he rose but could not stay long as he staggered. He slumped to the ground, and died.

“Blood poured down the side of his chest. And with frightened eyes, his company stared at their fallen leader. They lost all their courage and their resolve to defend themselves, as they raised their hands in surrender. They stood like mute stones as we plundered their cattle and their weapons.

“We collected a good number of their animals, without any further resistance from those fellows, leaving enough for their sustenance and also to evade any curse from them. We departed from there with great speed.

“So you see men are men only when they achieve their purpose. What you are portraying is extreme cowardice. It doesn’t mean that the death of one fellow is the end of everything. We lost many people in the wilderness but we later prospered. We were very determined to build the base of our wealth.” Kiptum ended his discourse with a message of courage and wisdom.

Somehow, as we came to terms with reality and determined to move on, we faced a new problem.

“Shh,” somebody whispered as he pointed towards the entrance of the cave. To our horror, we saw an armed man approaching cautiously. He entered the cave, and after a short while he stepped out and motioned in an opposite direction. From a thicket nearby, appeared over fifteen armed warriors carrying the carcass of an animal. Kiptum told us that they were Kony security men. Like ghosts, we moved away from their presence. It was one thing fighting the beasts but brushing shoulders with the Kony warriors was quite another thing. It was less dangerous to stay in the cave with a cobra than to fight with the Kony warriors. When we were far away, we moved fast to put a safe distance between them and us. Our people had told us *ma kibarchin tarit kwangoi*.¹⁵

Surely we did not want those people to know of our presence as we were already in preparation to raid their territory. If they came to know of our presence, it might warn them to take more serious precautions or decamp to a safer place. The good news was that we had completely erased every sign of our previous visit to the cave. They were never to know that their cousins were lurking around with a hidden agenda.

Having traversed two ridges, we climbed a tall tree full of branches and leaves. There we decided to rest until dawn. Never did we know that a family of gorillas had the same idea. Perhaps they had also travelled far and were also tired and wanted a place for their night security. They had a rude shock to learn that the tree had already been claimed. Dejected, the family left. They were

¹⁵Do not show the birds your bows, because they may fly away and warn the rest.

surely not amused. They might have been wondering what their clothed descendants were doing up a tree instead of being inside a warm house. They grunted heavily in complaint.

We had thought that we would be comfortable up the tree but it was not to be. The chilly wind nearly froze us. We shivered the whole night and feared tumbling down. But we kept on recalling the horrible death of our friend a few hours earlier as he had tumbled down the tree right on the horns of the invading buffaloes. We knew our murdered comrade as a warrior who had fought many animals before and had defended our land courageously. That screeching wail kept coming back to me throughout that night. Also the issue of the Kony warriors was very frightening. Suppose they had arrived late while we were already in the cave, what could have happened? We would have been massacred. A chilling shiver ran through my spine.

Early at dawn, we left. We were feeling very weak and sleepy. For the best part of the day we were low in the spirit as we wondered about the worth of our mission. Finally, by late afternoon, we succumbed to fatigue and despair. For about two hours, we slept peacefully. We were in a thicket, and were alert like a cat. As I was still in slumber, my keen sense of smell saved us. Never did we know that a python had slithered near us, and was in the process of making a kill. We heard a slight movement and to be followed by a hungry hissing sound.

In one swift single movement, we were already up with our arms, and ready. But we were too late. Already in our presence was a huge python that was ready to make a meal out of us. As fast as lightning it had struck with all its might at one of us while hissing viciously. A python is a creature that I don't admire as a companion. It has a squeezing power that could leave its victim in a mass of broken bones. At the tip of its tail is a sharp needle with which it can

leave its victim in a state of stupor before squeezing the victim to death.

Anyway, before it could do further damage to our comrade, we sliced it to pieces. That was a lucky incident though our friend remained dizzy for several hours. We finally moved to a safer hideout where we rested for the night.

So far, we had found nothing in relation to our mission. There was no sign of the Maasai. We moved towards the camp frustrated at a fruitless mission and with the sad news of our departed friend. We arrived a day late in the evening and we made a full report which caused greater sorrow to our colleagues than we had expected.

Later on, we learnt that the other two parties had arrived with nothing much to report.

The question everybody asked was where the Maasai people had disappeared. Had their medicine man had a vision of our approach and warned them? If so, what about our medicine man who had prophesied success for us? At the time of our departure we were told that the old man had seen through his divination kraals full of cattle, in which we were being hailed by two remarkable animals: a huge black bull and a purely white heifer. I began to think that the old man might have miscalculated in his divinations. We slept late that night after exhausting all our thoughts.

Long after we had slept, the elders talked at length on the mysterious disappearance of the Maasai. Kibitok was the most disturbed person.

He never slept as he remained in deep thought about the movements of the people. At dawn, he was rewarded. The name of a place, Orum, came to his mind mysteriously. He had heard it

mentioned occasionally, but had never given it a second thought. He knew of the general direction of the place but had never visited that area.

As the elders were contemplating on what to do next, Kibitok approached them. Already their eyes were red because of sleeplessness. After greetings, he was asked whether he had thought of anything worthwhile.

He said, "Elders, there is a place I had heard mentioned by those people. That place is Orum. It is a distance from here. I believe that is where they have gone."

"So what is your suggestion, young man?" an elder asked him.

"I propose that we decamp and move towards that direction, while I lead other spies ahead," Kibitok said.

Everybody accepted this proposal. Warriors were later informed that we were moving out early the next morning. Various preparations were made as all units were thoroughly examined and every sign of our presence in that area was carefully erased. Every warrior also made sure that all his provisions were in order.

8

After many days, we had crossed several rivers, valleys and ridges. In most cases we had opted for areas with dense vegetation surrounding rivers. Kibitok and I were on most occasions ahead of the spies. He was becoming my best companion for we had the same talents of observation.

One evening, I climbed a tall tree to look around as usual. And while I was right at the top, I saw what appeared like smoke. For almost one hour, I made a careful observation. Finally, I confirmed that what I had seen was indeed smoke. I climbed down and together with my fellow spy, we informed the rest.

“We must now be aware that the people we are after also have spies all over. So we will move forward with great caution. We must never be seen, as that will make our enemies aware of our presence. Furthermore, we cannot walk into their hands, like those Kipsigis fellows in that war of Mogore. They were already counting their mission as successful when death came upon them. We do not want such a thing to happen to us also,” Arap Sambai said.

“The spying squad will walk some distance ahead and the rest of the *Ng'anymetiet* unit will follow. We need to take every step in total silence. So far we have met with some ugly incidences, but that cannot diminish our resolve,” Arap Kitongo commented.

For five days we moved like leopards. However, nothing showing the presence of human beings or even cow dung was reported. Day after day the monotonous environment and the unending march dismayed us. The most disturbing thing was the lack of food. We had already exhausted all our stores. Warriors showed an admirable degree of perseverance. Though we were fatigued and famished, we never lost sight of our goal.

One evening our stress and hunger became intolerable. Nobody was willing to take risks by moving further ahead. To many, it was already a waste of time and effort. I agreed with them. My courage and patience had already diminished so much that I hated this whole mission. I was very concerned about the survival of some five hundred souls. That night's anguish almost shattered my resolve, as I remembered so many things that I could be doing at home rather

than facing death in this unknown country. We were now left with only a bony ox that could hardly satisfy us for one last meal

Our elders had another meeting to make some changes. They had to tackle the two major issues: our food and our survival.

It was no longer possible to meet the challenges with empty stomachs unless something tangible was done. Late at night, the elders accepted the failure of the mission, and made the painful decision of killing the single remaining ox for our last meal.

They made a plan to inform the warriors first thing in the morning so that preparations for return journey could be made.

Early the next day before dawn, three elders, Arap Chomu, Kipkeror and Arap Kitongo went a further distance to observe omens before embarking on the homeward journey. At sunrise, their revelation came. They saw a raven perched on a tree in front of them, facing their direction. It was facing them, which was a sign of good omens. The elders welcomed the bird and spat towards its direction as a sign of acceptance and blessings. As the other two elders were hypnotized by the new revelation, Arap Chomu heard from afar a donkey braying.

After a long silence he asked, "What did you hear?"

"Nothing," was the answer.

"Let us retreat," he said.

After this, the elders were called to an urgent meeting. They were informed of the good signs ushered in by the raven and what Arap Chomu had heard. There was excitement though nobody would show it.

The warriors were informed of the good news. They were overwhelmed with joy and forgot all their sufferings. I have never seen a more disciplined group in my life, and I do not think I will see one anyway. No warrior grumbled on the way despite all the problems and hazards. They fully heeded the advice of the elders and their leaders.

A group of able spies was organised, consisting of Kibitok, ten others, and myself. Those were the most experienced men to serve as spies. Though of late we had been so much sorrowful, we forgot all that because of the good news. There was a lot of activity in solidarity as elders gave various orders. We followed every word of what the elders ordered.

For several hours, we moved like shadows and at times on all fours. Finally, at a distance, we heard a cow mooing. Kibitok and I left the rest of the party and moved forward. We crawled on. After moving for a long time, we came to a clearing. We marvelled at the herds below as we watched from a thicket. We could not see the herdsman, though we knew of their presence. Finally a figure shifted its position. We watched carefully.

Kibitok motioned me to remain behind as he crawled forward. After a short while, the figure reacted sharply towards our direction and there I saw that death was imminent. The man moved a step forward and crouched. For a long time I watched as my heart kept pounding. I was anticipating the Maasai warrior to raise a war cry after killing my colleague.

Having remained stooped for a long time, he stood up, and continued in his earlier position. I came to learn later that the man was a Nandi herdsman employed by the Maasai, and also a close friend of Kibitok. He continued keeping watch over his herds as if nothing had happened.

Kibitok told me that the man was his confidant, and that he would join us soon.

True to his promise, he came. He was called Kibet.

We talked in whispers for almost an hour on various issues especially our mission. He gave us a clear picture of the *Kamoriongek* and their security.

The best news was that their warriors were away on an expedition leaving the *manyattas*¹⁶ with very few able warriors. Also to note was that every evening at dusk there were traditional songs and dances at the far end of the village. Most of the active warriors would be there, enjoying the merriments. He further told us that elders were busy enjoying beer in many homesteads around. Kibitok inquired about his former employers and how they could be identified during the raid. Kibet told us that the family in question was farther away. In our custom, it was wrong to bite the hand that fed you. Kibitok was conscious of that custom. We told Kibet of the time when the raid would be affected. He also gave us a very good guide towards their *manyattas* and especially areas in out posts.

Finally, having accomplished our mission, we retreated. We found our colleagues waiting anxiously and with them we moved to the camp.

¹⁶Low, grass-thatched, huts inhabited by nomadic people in many parts of Africa

We informed the warriors and the elders of our findings, which they received attentively.

Kibitok informed the elders on various points, especially the strengths and the weakness of our enemies. He confirmed that the best time would be an hour before dusk. "Reason given by Kibet was that the elders would be returning home from drinks while young men would be dancing and singing in the village. By then women would have finished milking. This meant that most people would be relaxed and idle before night security men took over," he concluded.

After learning the good news, we sent food hunters to various directions except the Maasai territory. By the evening, we had a lot of honey and wild fruits, with which we filled our bags and pouches. At least we had enough to eat and gain strength.

Early in the morning, our hectic preparations started. The sad part was that our only remaining animal had to be slaughtered to feed the warriors before the raid in the evening. Also we had to make sure that all our necessary provisions were ready. At this time, our total unity was very important. We knew the consequences of such raids, especially against the Maasai who were men of war. The fact that most of their warriors were away could not make us relax. Everybody in the Maasai land was a real warrior. Even women had the full knowledge of war.

For the whole of that day our minds remained preoccupied with the thoughts of life and death. We were ready to face either of them as men.

In the afternoon we ate to our satisfaction knowing that it was not possible to eat again for the next two or three days depending on our survival. Before we decamped, the elders offered prayers to

our ancestors and Asis for our protection. But before then we were fully counselled about our conduct in the war.

Arap Kitongo spoke at length on various issues and regulations surrounding wars.

“Warriors, as you know our mission has approached. The distance is just like between your nose and mouth. I want to give you some advice now. You should know that we are waging war against other men who are also people of war. They know this area more than we do. We are foreigners in their land. But one thing I know is that you too are men. They have stolen a lot of our animals, and as far as I can say is that all that they now have, was once ours. We must retrieve it for our people’s survival. Our prosperity depends on you. You are the men that the Nandi tribe has ever produced. Your courage has been known and that was the reason why you were honoured with this responsibility. Reasoning must supersede everything in war. I would like to remind you also that there must never be any irresponsibility among you. Do not kill a woman, an aged person or a child. But be sympathetic to them. Our mission is not to kill but to have something for our children at home. If you will go by the regulations laid down by our ancestors, I am sure you will live to enjoy the fruits of your labour. But failure to do so will bring a curse on you. As part of your spoils, you may bring with you boys and girls.”

That was the gist of Arap Kitongo’s speech.

After being thus equipped morally, we were allowed to prepare ourselves for a departure. Also we had dyed our skins with ochre mixed with fats so as to appear appropriate in war.

By the evening, we had approached our destination. We had been shown a safe route that enabled us to pass unnoticed. Just before dusk we had already stationed ourselves at various strategic

points watching all activities around the *manyattas* at a distance away.

Women were busy milking their herds while various activities were going on. The women were never to know that the enemy was watching their valued herds, and that they were no longer theirs. As we watched the children in various stages of merriment, we tied the *kaboger*¹⁷ around our necks. These were heavily dyed.

All of a sudden, Kipkeror, a man of war, blew the kudu horn. And soon bushes sprang into life. Our dyed clothes were hoisted in the air as we moved forward in the highest speed ever. The air rang with the sound of our thigh bells that had now been un-muzzled. They produced a frightening sound. Before the inhabitants understood the reality, we were already in their midst destroying kraals with our swords, while the rest had already jumped in. Already cows were being rounded up.

The evening calm was totally intruded as women and children raised alarm. Cattle mooed while goats and sheep bleated. Men could be seen from all quarters moving swiftly towards the war field. A complete war took place. That was the time I came to know what a Maasai was made of. They were just ready for war. Our presence erupted like lightning's explosion but they were there to defend their animals more than their lives.

Many men had fallen victims of that unwarranted destruction and soon dead bodies could be seen scattered all over. Though our responsibility was to defend the *samburto* group in charge of cattle, we could not avoid killing with spears, clubs and arrows. Never did I see real men in action. Some were wrestling after having lost all their weapons. I saw one of our warriors cornered by women as he

¹⁷War clothes

tired to snatch a young girl. He put up a strong resistance and managed to escape death, but he could not carry the kid away.

During that moment of confusion, the *samburto* group, assisted by the *nganyemetiet* unit had already amassed a lot of animals, both goats and cattle, and was already far away leading them at high speed. The *oldimdo* unit was still behind settling matters and making sure that any immediate pursue was effectively suppressed. After making sure that the rest had gone far, they followed as darkness settled upon the troubled land.

The land actually was in trouble. Many were dead, while the rest had been left for dead. Women and children were moaning in bereavement. The enemy had robbed them of their people's lives and property.

War brings destruction. Within no time a lot of damage had been done. A lot of souls had been dispatched to the spirits' world. Many children had been made orphans, and many women widows. Some had been maimed for the rest of their lives. The land would be littered with bones as a testimony to the wanton destruction. Those children were never to enjoy milk again. Was it really necessary to loot their means of survival in the name of retrieving our lost property? I found the whole idea crazy.

I saw bodies of the warriors as well as women, children and other helpless beings sprawled all over. The dying ones were wailing and at the same time cursing us loudly as blood poured everywhere.

I had never participated in any destructive venture as far as I remember, and neither had I witnessed a mass murder like that before us. Before long, many bodies had been rendered lifeless. During this time, I saw a Maasai woman-warrior appearing with a shield and a sword in her hands. Possibly she may have retrieved these from her dead husband. She was full of bitterness in her heart.

Within no time she had killed many Nandi warriors who were retreating. Since it was wrong to kill a woman, none of us could raise our hands against her.

Then I witnessed the most shocking scene. A Maasai lad emerged with all the determination of rescuing a calf that he loved dearly. As the lad got hold of the calf's front leg, a mistake happened as fast as lightning.

Not far away was a wounded Nandi warrior struggling for life. A Maasai warrior had cornered him, and wanted to slay him.

One of us shot an arrow to save our man. Unfortunately, our arrow missed its target.

The sharp and forceful arrow entered through the lad's right eye, cutting across his brains and penetrated at the other end. The impact lifted the boy in midair before crashing him down on the ground, dead.

The boy's intention was never to wage war against the enemies but to salvage what he loved most. He had nothing else in the world apart from that tiny calf as its mother had already been stolen and driven away. His short desperate contact with the calf meant a lot to him and he knew that with it life could at least be bearable.

"Woi! Woi! Help us," Shouted a desperate Nandi warrior. He had been left for dead in that suffocating field. As far as I could see, he had no hope to life. He was alone among enemies who were closing in fast to kill him. He saw death coming to him speedily. Although he had been wounded and beyond rescue, yet, with his bow and quiver full of poisonous arrows he was not ready to die like a dog. He was fully prepared to face the Kamoriongek alone. He

had collected many quivers of arrows from his departed comrades. So in death, he smiled cruelly as he awaited his attackers.

And, sure enough, he fought. He was on high ground protected by bushes and between two rocks, while his enemies were more vulnerable as they were in a clear field. As speedily as he could, he shot several arrows, none of which missed its target. The way he was shooting led the Maasai warriors to believe that there was a large group of the enemy hidden up on the high ground.

Finally, he ran short of arrows, while at the same time his stamina decreased as he had lost much blood. He was found by the Maasai warriors, having no energy even to defend himself. He was smashed to pieces, but his enemies could not celebrate, for the damage he had done to them was great. They were left shaking their heads wondering how one man could kill so many people in his last moments. His actions enabled a good number of us to escape death. We remembered Kipsoi with tears for his courage that saved our mission.

As we escaped, I was fortunate to come across a young girl who was wandering in the wilderness, having escaped from the heavy attack that had decimated her people. She was already numb as she wailed hoarsely. She was running away to nowhere in particular, but trying to run away from her dying village.

Her dream of escape was short-lived as she bumped into me unexpectedly. When she saw me, she fainted. I felt great pity for that young life that could be mauled by beasts around. With a sad heart I lifted her onto my shoulders. She was about six years old. And following others, I ran after them at high speed with the determination to save her life.

When she regained consciousness later at night, she found herself in a strange situation that was beyond her understanding.

She could no longer shed tears, but watched in bewilderment as we continued to move fast away from her home, with the cattle of her people.

Carrying her by my left hand I led her through many difficulties on the way. Her being at my left hand meant that she was to be more like my sister than a wife to be. Several times I had to carry her on my shoulders, as she was too young to walk the long track. Time and again I could see her in tears, as she clung to me as her only hope. She could not comprehend what was happening to her.

She knew that she was never to see her family again especially her beloved mother whom she had adored as her god. She had no idea who her captors were because of their strange language. The little girl felt she was in a mysterious world. She could not even think of escaping as wild animals like lions were already a menace in that area, and she knew it.

As the days followed, she got friendly with Kibitok, who understood her language. His talk to her occasionally created a new hope of life in her and helped her healing process. Gradually, she accepted her new life. We called her *Chemining*.¹⁸

For the whole of that night, we ran like mad men. In a way we *were* mad men. No sane person could do what we had done. By morning we had covered so many places that no man could cover in many days. We had gone through many rivers and ridges without stopping for rest.

By mid-day we had passed through Kirbotiet towards the eastern direction. Two days later, we had gone through Ng'etunyek,

¹⁸Little girl

Chepyewa and Kata-lel. We could not stay long as there were many dangers around. We were in the Kony territory and lions in that area were a real menace to our security.

On the fifth day, since the raid, we had gone through *Emtebess*¹⁹ on our way to Kipsaina. We were all tired, but we could not rest. That evening we arrived at Kapterit after crossing *Ainopmager*²⁰ where we built our first night enclosure since we left the land of Kamoriongo. Our animals were very tired and so they slept the whole night without causing any trouble, even though both the animals and we were very hungry.

Early the next morning, we took stock of the situation. We found, to our dismay, that we lost a lot of warriors. Though we had in our possession over eight hundred cattle, which could not match the souls that perished in the war. Anyway, men were born to die in battlefields.

Having counted our gains and losses, we continued. We went towards Seum where we stayed for a couple of days. Our animals were already gaining strength as they grazed leisurely. The area was very peaceful. We could at times be heard humming songs in praise of our mission.

On the third day after Kapterit, we crossed Chepkaitit on our way to Kapkonor-ket. We herded our animals through to Kaptiony on our way to what was later to be known as Chepsiro.

¹⁹The present day Endebess

²⁰The present day Nzoia River

There we found a very suitable area. We made a plan to rest there for a few days. In one of the mborit,²¹ we decided to build a strong enclosure. But there was one problem.

We did not have an axe to cut huge thorny trees for that purpose. As we were still in that dilemma, we saw a family of *Cheranganyiek*²² passing by. We asked them for assistance to which they readily agreed after being promised a heifer. As the enclosure was being constructed, some of the men slaughtered an ox. As it was ready, elders were asked to examine the entrails for omens. There a disagreement arose between the elders that caused a dispute among them. The name Chepsiro was created for that place meaning a place of dispute. Some were of the opinion that bad omens had been sighted while others rejected this opinion.

Anyway, for the first time in many months we made a very big fire on which we roasted the carcass of our animal. We ate very tasty meat that day.

After three days, we decamped. Our fear had now subsided, as we knew that we had moved far away from danger. By afternoon, we were in the plains of Barsombe after descending from Cherangany hills.

Our progress was slow now. We were moving at a relaxed pace herding our fortune ahead as they grazed leisurely on that return journey. By late in the evening, we had not gone far. Fortunately we had found a lot of water for us all.

In the evening, we made a strong enclosure for the night. There the elders had a meeting to separate the two clans of Kapchepkendi and Kaptalam. That was agreed unanimously. Next came the division

²¹Forested valley

²²The Cherangany people

of the livestock into two proportionate herds. That was also agreed in peace. We also agreed to offer two animals (a heifer and a bull) as a gift to the *Orkoiyot*.²³

The next day after prayers and blessings, the work of separating the herds started. First, male animals were put aside. Then the members of the two divisions were divided into two equal groups. Everyone was satisfied that there was an equal share of the spoils between the two groups. We shook hands in peace with the warriors of Kaptalam as they prepared to lead. Arap Chomu their leader was full of praises for the whole operation with a promise that the two divisions would work together in future also. Our leader, Arap Kitongo, also could not hide his ecstasy, as he shed tears in praise of the good cooperation between the two divisions.

10

Meanwhile, life at home was entering a new phase. It was two months since we had left, and our relatives and friends were already showing signs of disturbance both spiritually or mentally. Many visits had been made to the *Orkoiyot's* homestead and all along, he had delivered assuring oracles. His divinations had showed him everything. And he was so much encouraged by the visions that his face shone whenever he spoke to the people. He was sure that everything was in order.

The tribal emissaries would leap with joy at the good news. The elders would pacify the worrying people by using words of ancestral wisdom. Prayers were offered. But everybody knew that fighting the Maasai was just like inviting a leopard to a wrestling match knowing that you had no claws and teeth to match his. But then, some men *can* match leopards. There was this man at home

²³The Chief Elder

who knew how to kill a leopard alone. On many occasions leopards ascended upon our flocks. One day a leopard was surrounded in a thicket after it had destroyed many animals. While men were clearing the bush in their forward march, the man climbed right into the bush coming face to face with the animal. As the leopard jumped at him, he had it down strangling it with his bare hands. He later emerged pulling the dead body of the animal.

One evening the elders met in the house of Telenges to share news concerning us. They sat around the beer-pot and sipped the brew using straws coming from certain trees. They rested their backs on the wall behind them. They talked slowly, and were in no hurry to come to the main point. First, they shared other stories.

“As I was going out this morning, I met Arap Mibei of Kamelil division. He was in a hurry visiting his kinsfolk around. And immediately I saw him I knew that his journey was of no use. Having asked about the well being of where he came from I found that he was hesitant. He did not want to tell me what really his problem was.” Arap Sirtoet said.

“Actually there must have been something serious he was after” Telenges cut short the story, “He is somebody known for lateness. People say his many wives are a real problem to him. But what was the cause of his hurry?”

“Surely he had a real reason to leave his house very early. Arap Sirtoet continued, “He told me there that someone had been murdered in his clan in their division. And he was coming to report to his clansmen here.” He continued as he sipped beer from the straw and swallowed twice as he continued. For a long time none spoke for such a thing was unheard of.

“And what was the cause?” an elder asked shaking his head in sorrow.

Arap Sirtoet continued as he sucked at his straw, fitted with a homemade sieve. "According to Arap Mibei, two men, one his cousin, and another from a different clan, had gone to hunt an animal for food." He paused to rub his thumb at the opening of the drinking-straw, which had been blocked. "The other man had entered into a bush to kill an antelope that had been sighted earlier on. The young men did know that inside that bush was a rhino. As he stumbled upon it, the terrified young man fled the bush without warning his friend of the danger they were in."

"And what happened?" One asked anxiously. "The other boy thought that whatever was running towards him was an antelope and got prepared with his bow and arrows. Before looking at whatever emerged from the thicket, he shot in the direction that caught the victim on his forehead"

"And what happened next?"

"All that Arap Mibei's cousin heard was a short wail before the victim died painfully."

That was followed by a long silence as every elder contemplated on such a misfortune.

"And what happened then?" Many voices came up together. "The offender, on realizing what he had done, cried loudly for his beloved friend. However his wails were cut short when the rhino came running in full speed towards the weeping boy. The rhino gored him severely, and left him in great pain."

"Did he die?"

"No. He has survived miraculously. I have said again and again that these people of Kamelil are all stupid." An elder of Kaptalam added sorrowfully, as he adjusted his cloak (*Sambut*) "They have

never learnt that shooting first without knowing the target is bad. With us we were taught to stand in a strategic position and only to shoot when you are sure of the victim and its speed.

“When did it happen?” An elder asked. “It took place yesterday in the afternoon,” said Arap Sirtoet.

“So the dead man’s people have been informed?”

“Yes”

“So elders, when such a thing happens, what should be done, given that the other man had not intended to commit such an offence?” One of the junior elders asked.

“They will have to follow the traditional laws,” an elder said, “Compensation must be arranged after the two clans have been reconciled. That must be the reason why Arap Mibei was in a hurry. His clan’s people must be informed to make a prompt collection of cattle that will be paid to the victim’s clan. That will be followed by a cleansing ceremony as the murderer is impure and cannot be allowed to mix with other people until he is cleansed.”

“As far as I know he is alone in the wilderness living in the bush. Even his friends and relatives cannot talk to him. Even if somebody was to feed him, the two must never meet. People are terrified of him. Even his own mother cannot go near him, for he is unclean.”

The elders were silent for a long time as they imagined a young man living in isolation, feared and without sympathy and love even from his own people.

“Mother of Chesondin, where are you?” Telenges called his wife

The middle-aged woman emerged quickly having heard the summons. "Bring water" was all that she was told as she left in a hurry.

She soon came back carrying a small pot full of hot water. Kneeling on one knee, she poured the water into the pot at the centre to heat the liquor and dilute its strength. Elders stirred the contents of the pot with their straws.

Only now, did they come to the real purpose of their meeting.

"Elders, what have you heard of the birds? Is there anyone who has information of their well-being?"

For a long time none spoke.

Finally Arap Sirtoet, the seer, cleared his throat bringing the others to attention. "Yes we visited the *Orkoiyot*, our elder, two days ago as per your mouth. We found him at home waiting for us. He had been informed of our visit by a bird the day before."

He was silent as he took a strong swallow of the hot contents. He then popped a lump of tobacco into his mouth, added a pinch of ash, chewed for a short while, and finally pushed it with his tongue between the inner left cheek and the gums. Satisfied, he spat out a jet of brown saliva as he wriggled his bottom for more comfort on his traditional elder's stool.

He continued, "As I was saying, we found him at home. He wanted to know how everybody was faring and also about our herds, to which we replied that all was well."

"Now listen to me, all of you." Telenges, the host, being one of the tribal emissaries to the medicine man *Orkoiyot* spoke. "The chief elder gave us the good news that the birds will be on the way

coming but not all of them. You know that waging war means life and death. But good news is that they were blessed with cows. Our people say, in such a situation we shed tears from one eye.”

“We are not expecting a devastation like the Kavirondo raid. At least we have been informed that the birds will win and are on the way coming with a fairly large herd.” Arap Sirtoet continued. He knew that the elders were in a dilemma.

Our elders say *Makiriire let amu mengen tai*.²⁴ The Kavirondo laid left our people dead but we have never lost the desire of owning cattle through raids.” Telenges continued to instill hope in the aged minds.

Nobody spoke for a long time as each old man wondered whether his son was among the lucky ones. Several of them shook their heads as they hoped in their hearts.

“But elders, let us remember one thing.” Telenges continued, “Men are born to die for the land. So we should prepare ourselves to receive those who survive and mourn for the departed in war. But I know one thing. They fought courageously to retrieve what the Maasai had stolen from us.”

11

Never had we realized that since we left Chepsiro our movements were being watched. Possibly the Cherangany fellows connived with the Marakwet to rob us of our fortune. Having noted the direction of our movement, they got prepared for raiding us. A good number of their warriors were amassed at a place we thought was

²⁴Never cry over the past for you don't know the future.

Endo.²⁵ A hasty preparation was made. In that area was a narrow pass as the land was very hilly. At this site, the Marakwet warriors planned to ambush us. The Kaptalam clan passed there very successfully without any problem as the fellows watched. We were far behind without any idea of what was to come.

All that I remember is that I saw a movement when we were in the middle of the pass. I did not know that it was a signal of attack. All of a sudden from all sides, all assortments of missiles including stones began to rain down on us. Kipkeror on realizing the danger we were in send an alarming call of distress through the horn warning Kaptalam of our predicament.

Arap Chomu heard the call and asked his group, "Did you hear something? It appears as if Kapchepkendi has a problem. He needs our urgent help." Within no time preparations had been made. Some warriors were to remain behind with the herds while the rest were to heed our urgent call of distress.

Meanwhile, Songoro Arap Sisiwa, a very powerful person, had dispatched many aggressors to death using a buffalo's horn. He was actually a very huge man, and very courageous. He stood atop the cattle, a sight that terrified the Marakwet. As they clambered for safety uphill, Kaptalam under Arap Chomu arrived to finish the job. Very few of our attackers were lucky to escape. Those that did, carried bad news home. We lost some of our men but our assailants suffered a much heavier loss.

Songoro Arap Sisiwa, our hero in that battle, was formerly a Kony whom our Nandi warriors had captured as a boy. He was raised under the auspicious courtesy of the family of Kapchuriai in Nandi. He was later assimilated into the Nandi way of life.

²⁵It actually turned out to be Kaisaget hills.

We were very thankful to members of the Kaptalam division for their great assistance that enabled us to survive. Those Marakwet could actually have wiped us off the face of the earth.

They were more advanced in arrow making and the application of poison on their arrowheads. They would have done a clean job on us had it not been that we too had come from another war. If we could defeat the Maasai people, who were the Marakwet anyway! We especially thanked Kipkeror for his courageous move that distracted the attention of those people. His name still rings in people's memory as they mention *Kipkeror eng Endo*.²⁶ His kudu horn caused our kinsmen to rush for our need.

After some days, we arrived at Sirgoit, a place that was as smooth as a liver, except for scattered stones. On arrival late in the evening, we built a huge fire, which could be seen from miles. The major reason was to notify the people at home that we were still alive and on the way home.

12

By now, life at home was extremely worrisome. Already five months had passed without any news about us. On several occasions elders at home had met to divine our mission and to pray for us. Asis and the ancestors were asked to lead us safely. Many visits had been made to the *Orkoiyot's* homestead. He himself had performed many divinations about us, and the results were very encouraging. At all times he gave information that pleased the elders. Some days before our arrival at Sirgoit they had been given the best news that soon they were to see a sign showing our arrival. The man had many

²⁶"Kipkeror in Endo." Kipkeror received this mention of honour by an earlier act of bravery to successfully defend the Nandi when they had been ambushed by the Marakwet at the Endo Pass on their way back after a success raid of the Pokot.

powers of divination. He could also get revelations through dreams, through casting lots and observing the bubbles in a pot of beer.

Late one evening, Telenges, the tribal patriarch, saw a bright light in the North. And so did other elders. Nothing was said about it as they waited for a confirmation that came the next evening on the same spot.

13

We were no longer in a hurry as we had arrived in our land. For three days we remained there herding as well as rejuvenating our spirits and regaining our health. We could not help remembering our departed comrades, especially those who were killed by the Marakwet in the Barsombe Plains.

We never knew that those worthless fellows could actually plan to rob us of our hard won cattle. We had undergone so many tortures to own them, even to the point of totally perishing, while they were at home doing nothing. Why they never organized such raids, showed that they were cowards, we reasoned.

“Those boys actually thought we were cowards like jackals. They did not know that we are also men who saw real fire. Just imagine, a handful of them coming against us, men!” Kipsugut offered as his eyes rested on the grazing cows. That was his sole attraction.

“I don’t think they will ever forget what we did to them as their bodies are either rotting or being eaten by hyenas,” somebody added as he applied some herbal medicine to a bruise on his thigh, which might have been caused by a sharp stone thrown by the Marakwet warriors.

“You see eh! Those men had infested the bushes along the pass just like lice on my head. Of course to me those people are no better than lice anyway or else they could not have planned to steal our cows.” A warrior contributed while playing a hide-and-seek game with lice on his garment. He squeezed them between his nails, as he would have liked to do to some of those Marakwet thieves.

Later, we proceeded leisurely, tending our herds. After some days we arrived at Ol’Lessos. We found our outpost station empty as security men had moved farther away. Nobody, not even our fellow young men whom we knew, wanted to meet us. We were considered very unclean and wild. They knew we had lived in the wild for over five months and we had ourselves become wild. And also they knew that war involved murder. So in that we were ritually unclean.

Of course, we were wild. Our garments were already tattered and our bodies very hairy. We were already beyond recognition. We appeared like a group of gorillas in tatters and carrying weapons. We looked like a cross between a man and a monkey. Our bodies were dirty because we never got time to bathe in months. Our hairy bodies were full of lice while our scanty garments were full of pests. Our long nails were bloody and we stank like a lair of wild beasts.

At Ol’Lessos we made another huge fire to signify our approach. People watched at home with a lot of perplexity. They had their own fears, as they did not know how many of us had perished in the war.

We rested there for a couple of days. Later, we moved towards Kosiyo. We also made another fire. Each clan slaughtered an ox. Now we had a lot of milk to drink from our cows. Some had calved on the way. At Kosiyo we could sing and dance in praise

of our animals and courage. We sang to remember how Songoro dispatched the Marakwet raiders to their death using a horn.

Finally, we decamped and proceeded towards Kaptumo on our way to Koyo. At a place known as Kipsumat near Koyo our tribal elders met us. Of course we were expecting them. They were very excited to see us alive and above all with animals. After the usual greetings and news of our journey, they wanted to know about those who had been killed. Those of us who had killed in the war, had vulture-heads tied around their necks as a testimony to their deeds.²⁷ Furthermore, the elders inquired whether we had shared our spoils in the right manner. When we told them that we had not yet done that, they gave us an opportunity to do so.

This is how it was done. First, every person was to have a partner. Kipsugut was my partner. All those who had participated in the spying work that led to the preparation of raids were given two heifers each.

I got mine. Then, each pair was given three cows. There could not be any further division. From the animals each person got, every firstborn heifer went to his partner. This was to ensure that each partner continued to have animals even if a calamity befell his partner's kraal destroying all his herds. In this way, he could not be rendered poor because he still had a share somewhere else. One cow, at times, could be inherited by up to five or more people. Their leader could take it to his kraal. And from its calves, the rest could become rich later.

²⁷Compare this with allusion to a similar practice in Western culture in Stephen King's *Dark Tower* series. It is interesting that the author's mentioning of this custom is independent of King's sources of information. -Ed.

Why did we do the above exercise in the wilderness and not at home? There was a serious reason for this. There were those lazy men, the home-stayers. They had planned to ambush us on arrival, but the elders had restrained them as such a thing had happened before. The elders warned them of two things. One, we were a bunch of tough and ruthless men returning from a war, and any provocation of us by those lazy men could result in their total massacre. Two, ambushing us for our animals would amount to stealing which would bring a curse on the perpetrators.

Some days later, we arrived at Kimaran. There a purification ceremony was performed to all of us. I have already told you earlier in my story how it was done. Those who may have murdered were set apart for further purification. I happily confess that I never killed any person. It was not my desire to shed any blood and therefore I avoided it. Our major concern was not even to steal, which was a sin, but to retrieve what had been stolen. Though there was the element of revenging against earlier misdeeds, death of a fellow human being was abhorred. But whether we had killed or not, we were unclean.

After the cleansing ceremony, we felt like born-again human beings. The old had gone. The old garments, weapons and our physical appearance had gone. Even the old food in our intestines was washed away through herbal medicine. We were supplied with new provisions.

From Kimaran, we moved towards Kobujoi where we arrived two days later. There, we rested waiting for a word from the elders. We were not to wait for long as the information arrived that the reception for us had been prepared a short distance away. It was to take place at noon that day. So we dressed to the occasion and ready to lead our animals as a testimony to our success.

Ariri-ri ri ri ri ri ri ri rh x2
Ariri-ri ri ri ri ri ri ri rh x2
Kongoi lagokyok! Kongoi Murenik!
Kongoi lagokyok! Kongoi Murenik!

The chorus “Thank ye our children, thank ye our warriors” echoed high in the sky as our mothers, sisters, and aunts joined together. Our male fraternity could not hide their excitement. In a single file led by our elders, both the young and the old embraced us. It all seemed like a beautiful dream! A *kambakta*²⁸ was raised as we all joined together and danced gracefully to celebrate our success. It was wonderful as we saw ourselves elevated to a higher position in our community. Even our girlfriends joined us and side-by-side we danced in unity.

My father, Kiptormoi, could not have remained behind. He provided me with *sinendet*,²⁹ and after embracing me he shook my hand several times shouting “*sere or-nyo! Sere or-nyo! Tuchin Asis, tuchin Asis!*”³⁰ Thus, he elevated my status to that of a respected clansman and not merely his son.

My uncles, brothers, sisters, aunts and friends then garlanded me. Finally I received a garland from Chesondin, my beloved.

Our kinsfolk later participated in another ceremony. Our mothers presented themselves with butter in horns. They anointed our faces, hands and legs as a mark of their blessings.

²⁸A song of victory

²⁹A sacred climbing plant

³⁰Grace to you, my clansman! May God cover you!

The elders offered many oral blessings and prayers for us. Asis and the departed ancestors were thanked more and more for the way they had led us through all those difficulties.

We led our herd home, but before they entered into our families' kraals, they had to be purified. At the kraal's gate an aged elder performed the cleansing ceremony. With prayers for protection and reproduction he sprayed them with milk from a gourd. The container was firmly closed with *seretyot*³¹ that represented the fertility of the land.

After that we were led to the euruek³² where we were rehabilitated before being incorporated into the general life of the community. We were there for many days. We ate a lot of food and drank a lot of soup and blood that was meant to renew our earlier health. A lot of herbal medicine was prescribed for our use during that period.

The ritual of seclusion was meant to heal us from all bad things that might have affected us on the way. Actually that was true. As I had said before, we were sick and weak. Therefore, joining the rest immediately could have led to a contamination that could have caused a disease in the society.

Of course, we had occupied various caves formerly used by hyenas, wild pigs and even reptiles, and possibly attacked by various ailments and more often had lice and ticks together. In the wilderness, we ate almost everything for our survival. Some of this wild vegetation could cause a slow death.

Elders and other warriors visited us almost daily to give us moral support. We had witnessed many sorrowful events that called

³¹Kikuyu grass

³²Secluded areas

for emptying our inner selves. We remembered our departed colleagues and how they were sent to the spirits' land, as we poured out the horrid tales to the elders that came to visit us. That healed our bodies and souls.

15

Our rehabilitation period finally came to an end. By then we had regained a lot of our physical and spiritual strength. We joined the rest in various chores. We felt rejuvenated as we watched our herds grazing leisurely, which was a sign that at least we were men and not women. We began to command respect among all ages. At least the elders could say that so and so is the *son* of so and so!

We participated in various tribal activities as before. At various outposts, we provided security for our land. We participated in killing wild animals that killed our herds.

On many occasions, we were involved in tribal dances and songs. At least some of us had something to boast of as we wove our success-stories into the songs. Unfortunately for us, such songs caused jealousy among the home-stayers.

Even months later, talks of our successful cattle-raid could be heard.

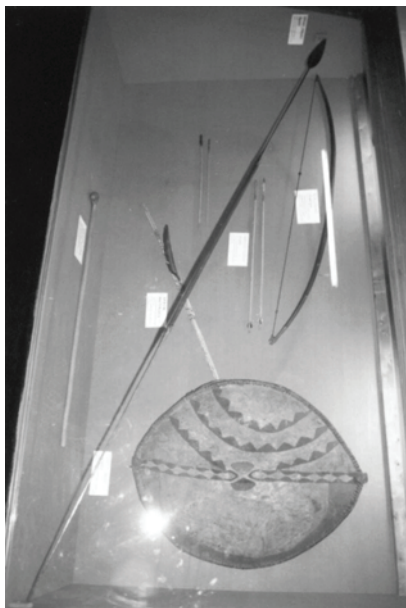
Life was good. We laughed.

Dying Voice

Ancient Nandi Life in Pictures



Photo-1: Traditional Nandi Woman (Clay Mould)
(Courtesy: National Museums of Kenya, Kitale. Photo: Author)



**Photo-2: Nandi Weaponry:
Spear, Shield, Bow, and Arrows**
(Courtesy: National Museums of
Kenya, Kitale. Photo: Author)

**Photo-3: Nandi Weaponry:
Quivers and Arrows**
(Courtesy: National Museums of
Kenya, Kitale. Photo: Author)



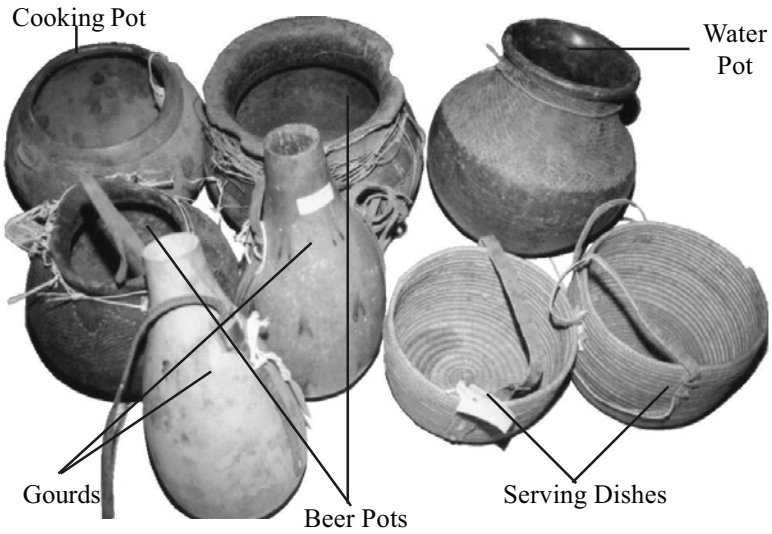


Photo-3: Nandi Utensils
(Courtesy: National Museums of Kenya, Kitale. Photo: Author)



Photo-4: Typical Nandi Homestead
(Courtesy: National Museums of Kenya, Kitale. Photo: Author)

CHAPTER FOUR

We Cried

1

We were over four hundred warriors when we left Kaptumek in Nandi Land. Six months later only four of us had survived. We had narrowly escaped a group of hyenas and a couple of lions a short distance away from Ol'Lessos, as we continued our doleful journey back home. We were stark naked. Our calfskin tunics were long gone after so many seasons in the wilderness. We were thin, weak and sick in the head.

Our bodies were full of sores. We were dirty and unshaven, and smelt of decomposed bodies. But we were alive.

The death of our fellow warriors weighed heavily on our hearts. It was so painful to accept the reality. Both the young and the old shed tears as they realised that the rest were no longer among the living.

What had happened to us was a big blow to our community. It meant that many children had been orphaned and many women had been widowed.

These events took place long, long ago, when cattle-raiding was the only source of acquiring wealth, prestige and wives. The Nandi were then known all over the area as a courageous people having waged successful wars against their neighbouring tribes for

cattle and land. The Nandi had chased the Maasai away from Kipsigak, Ndulele, Ol'Lessos and Uasin Gishu, leaving the area uninhabited. Who could stand before our sharpshooters and poisoned arrows!

2

Life is a heap of problems. Our Elders used to say, "*Metorokte teku*."¹ I now wonder why we were so anxious to meet danger in that Kapkwambisi cattle raid.

I am sure that we could have evaded many disasters. But in those days we enjoyed playing with dangers. We also badly needed to own cows. Owning a cow was not a simple business in those days. It has all changed these days. Now nobody cares to own cows. So, in those days we needed to own cows. And the fastest way of acquiring cows was through cattle-raids. Therefore, even though we knew of so many dangers in the cattle-raids, we still went for them, with our elders' blessings. Although the earlier raid at Kavirondo had left over four hundred of our young men dead, we were ready to face the Kony, our cousin-tribe. We knew it was a death-march. But we were ready to perish. Oh God! Just imagine an entire age-set of the Nandi, called Korongoro, perished leaving the Nandi with only seven age-sets.

It was a war that included warriors of all *pororiosiek*,² and never were they to wage a similar war together again. It left the land with only old men and boys apart from women and children. Producing children was greatly hindered, since the elders could not

¹If you see danger ahead, do not go forward to risk it. Hide until the danger has passed.

²Tribal divisions comprising several clan living in one place

provide such services to their daughters. Uncircumcised boys were equally useless. It was a taboo for them to do so.

And there we were the age-set of *Kaplelach* preparing to raid our cousins, *kap Kuugo*.³ If the Nandi land ever raised stubborn people, it was us. We never heeded any advice and we could never care less. That is why we perished in that war.

Our previous successful raid to *Kamoriongo*⁴ had elevated us to a superhuman status. We were huge, strong, and courageous. Our bodies were made only of muscles to an extent that we hardly felt pain, even when we were beaten with clubs. We had had our earlobes pierced and wore ear-jewelry of *kiranginik*.⁵ When someone said something that we did not like to hear, we simply shook our heads to create jingling sounds thus barring the voice of the speaker.

When we were counseled against destroying human life in the land of Kony, some of us did not pay close attention as jingling and murmurs from others were heard. So we were a stiff-necked bunch of youngsters.

3

One day I saw the elders hurrying to a meeting in the warriors' hut.

Things were moving faster than we had thought. The elders were to have an important meeting that was to bring about the eventual loss of many lives. But they did not know it at that time. They had great hopes in us. The Chief Elder was especially proud

³Grandfather's family

⁴The Maasai

⁵Tin metal

of us. He knew that the whole mission was going to be dangerous but then “our share of cows” from the Kony was due, and this superseded everything else. Also there was no way to cancel the raid since all the preparation was already in place.

The meeting started.

Telenges, the tribal patriarch, stood up and said, “Elders and warriors, greetings!” We all answered in unison “Greetings.” He continued, “Greetings again!” We also responded, “Greetings!” The meeting was called to order. There was a long silence as the elder looked at us and sized us up.

We feared Telenges. He was a powerful man. His word was law. There was no appeal against his decision.

Finally, he said, “We have assembled here before *Asis*, and our ancestors. The decision to raid Kapkwambisi has been sanctioned by the Chief Elder. And here before you is his club.”

He continued, “To teach you what governs a war we shall give you our last words of advice before you leave.” He paused and from his eyes tears flowed as he continued. He looked as though he was under the influence of a mysterious spirit. The spirit of war was already in him. He continued.

“If you fail to make our tribe prosperous through this venture, it means that you are women and the whole age-set of *Kaplelach* will remain a laughing stock for ever. The prosperity of the land will depend on the wits of your heads and the swiftness of your feet. The people of Kony should never be killed and above all you are not to loot everything of theirs. Just a share of what they have is all we need. They should not be plundered. You must never lose sympathy for them. Remember that we are not waging war against them. After all, they are also our people.

“There will be many obstacles on the way, but you are men, after all. Your senior age-sets of *Kipkoimet* and *Sawe* were made of lions, for they defeated the Maasai and chased them away from our land. We also know that we sired people who resemble us, lions. A lion cannot produce a hyena but another lion. And if there is anybody here who has hyena’s blood, he should leave immediately.” Nobody even tried to think of running away for that would have meant instant death through many spears, which were planted in the ground in front of every warrior.

He continued, “You have been entrusted with this mission and your failure will betray the Nandi people. You will have no more respect than women.” On being referred to as “women” a lot of jingling and murmurs could be heard from our age-set. We all detested such a humiliating title.

After glaring at us for a long time, he felt silent. He wiped away his uncontrolled tears while his body shook convulsively, as he was supported by two other elders to regain his sitting position.

Arap Sirtoet, another aged elder took over and greeted the congregation. He stood for a long time without uttering any word. To tell you the truth, I thought he was going to let out a curse upon us. He was the tribal seer.

Finally he said, “You have heard from our father. He is a man who has led many successful wars and knows what he meant by saying that only men win a war. We are convinced that you are men and that you alone will make our land enriched with plenty. The last Kamoriongo raid made us smile, but then that was not enough. Further, many of the cattle that you brought from that raid have already died of *kipkeiteet*.⁶ And also a lot of our people have died of the disease that killed the cattle. So what was brought from the

⁶Anthrax

last raid is almost gone. Already the aged, the young children, pregnant women and suckling mothers have nothing to eat, as there is no milk and blood to feed them.

Their lives depend entirely on your strength and courage. You are the people that could bring changes. You know the saying, “*makimondoe karna ma.*”⁷ You are that iron. We have never had cowards in our midst.

“Your unity and understanding must surpass everything. Let me tell you a story. Long time ago, there were two men who had gone hunting. They had agreed that whatever the danger, they would stand together, but one of them was a coward.

“One day while going through the bush, they saw a lion coming towards them. The coward ran away and climbed a tree, leaving his friend helpless, who did not know how to climb a tree. Realizing that he was alone and helpless, he lay down on the path, and stopped his breath, pretending to be dead.

The lion approached this person, licked him around the face, and thought that he was dead. It went away. Lions don’t eat dead bodies. Knowing that the lion had gone far, the coward jumped down from the tree laughing loudly. He asked his friend what the lion had whispered in his ear.”

His friend responded, “the lion has told me never to walk with cowards”. The two friends parted company and soon the coward was killed by the same lion.”

⁷No one should despise a burning iron, no matter how small it is.

Arap Sirtoet concluded by saying, “My advice is that cowards should not accompany real men. They will run away when enemies attack fiercely and weaken the courage of the strong men.”

“As you undertake this strenuous and great mission, we have a high esteem of your strength,” an elder observed, “Our ancestral spirits will never sleep till you come back. They will continue to guide you. Remember that you will never bear fruits unless you observe regulations governing the raids. Your unity and brotherhood will bind you successfully.

“Remember that your obedience to your leaders will prove your success and dignity. In every raid all warriors must accept to be led by their leader, and there should be no slackness in this.

“Remember, this raid to Kony is exceptional. You are not to kill anybody, if it is possible to do so. It is bad to kill our people. If you kill someone, it will bring a curse upon you and upon us.

“Our tribal custom allows you to bring girls and boys as part of your spoils. As you have already been told, leave enough animals for the Kony so that the curse may not follow you.

“Also don’t be tempted to burn their houses, because in them are their belongings and even babies. Remember the saying, “Once you have defeated your opponent in wrestling, you should not continue kicking him.”

He ended his words of wisdom. The meeting ended late in the evening.

Early the next day we all assembled at the warriors' hut for a spiritual dedication. This was to prepare us for our raiding mission. It was meant to invoke Asis to give us all his blessings during the course of our venture. We humbled ourselves sincerely before our Maker and Protector to give us cows for prosperity so that our land may be blessed with plenty. We were fully dressed for war with our weapons ready.

Arap Sirtoet stood in front of the warriors as we all knelt facing the East. He prayed loudly as we stretched our open palms to receive Asis' blessing:

Asis! Kakisain, kasech
Asis! Kasain ale tukwech lagok
Asis! Kakisomin irip ye ruitos as ye bendi
Asis! Kakisomin indochi ak iletyi
Asis! Ma king'etos kesain
Asis! Konech sapon
*Asis! Rip Emoni.*⁸

Also prayers for ancestors were made as we continued kneeling down.

⁸God, here us, we pray.
 God, I pray that you protect these our children.
 God, we beseech you to guard them as they sleep and as they walk.
 God, we beg to you lead them from front and rear.
 God, we are not tired of praying to you.
 God, give us health.
 God, guard this our land.

*Oiik-chok, amu kiobegu, amo-olen kibarak chi, orip
 Emoni.
 Orip lagok.
 Orip boisiek ak achebiosok.
 Orip murenju ye bendi luget.⁹*

Finally, there were the traditional blessings offered by Telenges, who stood up and waving his fly whisk he bellowed, with us answering in chorus the last word of each line.

Elder

*Emonieb Nandi anyiny, ole anyiny.
 Komi tamono, anyiny, ole anyiny.
 Komi murenik anyiny, ole anyiny.*

Chorus

*Anyiny
 Anyiny
 Anyiny*

⁹Our ancestors, who died, do not say somebody killed you. Guard the land.

Guard the children.

Guard the elders and women

Guard the elders as they go to war.

<i>Komi lagok, chebiosok ak boisiek, anyiny</i>	
<i>ole anyiny.</i>	<i>Anyiny</i>
<i>Ye bendi murenik kosetei, bore ole bore.</i>	<i>Bore</i>
<i>Ye len koger bunyo, imenit ole imenit.</i>	<i>Imenit</i>
<i>Weksei ole weksei.</i>	<i>Weksei</i>
<i>King, ole king.</i>	<i>King!¹⁰</i>

As the blessings and prayers came to an end, an elder said, “As you depart from us tomorrow, we will call you *the birds of the air* and nobody will ever mention your names. You should also remember that evil spirits will be watching you as you march on your way. To protect yourselves against the Evil Eye, you should avoid calling one another by his real name. Rather you should take for yourselves names of women, and call one another by women’s names. This way the evil spirits will think that you are not a group of warriors, but a bunch of women, and the Evil Eye will not touch you.”

¹⁰**Elder**

The land of Nandi [is] sweet, say sweet!
 In it [are] pregnant women. Sweet,
 say sweet!
 In it [are] warriors. Sweet, say sweet!
 In it [are] children, women, and
 elders. Sweet, say sweet!
 May warriors going on a raid be blessed
 Say blessed!
 If an enemy spots them, say may
 darkness overshadow them!

They will come back safely. Say, they
 Will come back safely!

Amen, say Amen!

Chorus

Sweet!
 Sweet!
 Sweet!
 Sweet!
 Sweet!
 Be blessed!
 May darkness
 overshadow them!

They will come
 back safely!
 Amen!

The time that preceded our mission was a holy period. Nobody was to utter any bad word or do anything that could hurt anybody. Even sexual intercourse was forbidden as it could bring in bad omens.

The name of “*Asis*” was on our lips every now and then.

5

As the early birds sang to welcome the appointed day, we the warriors, the elders and women marched towards the homestead of Telenges. There we were provided with all the necessary supplies. We were armed with spears, quivers full of arrows, bows, shields, clubs and swords. Also each of us received a skin pouch full of millet, which we slung over our shoulders.

In addition to all these other foodstuffs were our food. These were dried meat and honey. And also *suatinik*¹¹ were led.

All the warriors were fully attired for war. Some of us, who were known as more courageous, wore their *Kutwet*,¹² made out of lion-skins or ox-hide, and decorated with ostrich feathers.

Since we had participated in the spying missions in the earlier raids, we somehow felt advantaged.

We stood in the three groups of *Ng'anymetiet*, *Samburto* and *Oldimdo*, all ready for inspection by the elders. The process was to make sure that all warriors had the necessary equipment. It was bad omens to forget anything because it amounted to calling off the whole process. Nothing was said at all. No one even wished us the best for the journey. All of us warriors had our eyes set ahead of us.

¹¹Herds of live animals

¹²Warriors' headgear

To speak the truth, we were no longer there but far away in the war fields.

Immediately after the inspection had been done, and all things were found in order, a *Kudu* horn was blown. Arap Kirong made four tremendous and powerful blasts from the horn.

He had such strong lungs that it was said his mother had overfed him with milk and porridge. The impact of the horn was great. The ground and the trees trembled. Birds and insects rose to the air rattling. Dogs howled and donkeys brayed. Cows mooed and children wailed. The cowards shook like leaves and some fainted. We stood like rocks. Nobody uttered even a single word; none coughed or sneezed though many people, especially women, had tears in their eyes. They were overwhelmed.

In the three groups, we moved forward like lions. Our eyes were fixed ahead. Nobody looked back for that alone could mean a bad omen. We knew it.

So we moved forward in the three groups. Our group also included the *Pirtik*¹³ whose responsibility was to provide security to the *samburto* group. The latter group was leading live animals and these were at risk of becoming preys for lions and other beasts. The *samburto* group played an important role. It was composed of immediate senior age sets of *Kipkoimet* and *Sawe*.

Its major responsibility was to share all communication throughout all groups. The *Pirtik* had the responsibility of carrying information to the other parties after being instructed by the junior elders. So in this case they were messengers as well as security men.

¹³Junior warriors

Our movement was slow. There were so many problems. We had to follow so many laws and customs according to the tribal wisdom. Also we were not to be worn out in any way because dangers were there at all times.

6

In a few days' walking, we had passed through places like Koyo, Kaptumo, Kosoiywo and Ol'Lessos. Little happened on the way. Tribal wisdom and norms guided us throughout our journey and we had mutual understanding. At Ol'Lessos camp an elder, Kipsongol, told the warriors how the age sets of Kipkoimet and Sawe fought courageously with the Maasai.

"You see, all this area of Kaptumo to Wareng was a Maasai territory," Kipsongol told us, "The land as far as Mugunya to Ndalat also belonged to them. Names like Ndulele, Ndalat, Ol'Lessos, Eldoret and Uasin Gishu are all Maasai names.

"Our elders of Kapkoimet and Sawe age-sets pushed them from Kaptumo to Mugunya and later on to Ol'Lessos. It was here that a decisive war was fought. We defeated the Maasai. Having been defeated, the Maasai held a decisive council on the next step, under the leadership of Ole Kaiboi from the clan of Mwitanik and Ole Mاتيangi of Uasin Gishu clan. It was there that a misunderstanding arose, as we were informed by some of the remnants.

"Ole Kaiboi said, "Because so many misfortunes have befallen us, let us retreat to Lol-debesi¹⁴ near Mt. Elgon."

"No. We must proceed to Ngachi-Narok," said Ole Mاتيangi.

¹⁴The present day Endebess

Ole Kaiboi said sadly, "We know Lol-debesi more than Ngachi-Narok as we had prospered in the former area before. I stand by my earlier proposal."

Ole Matiangi said, "I pray that we move step by step together. Let us not 'divide the ribs of our only cow.'"

"As I am a Laibon,¹⁵ the whole party must move westward; and if your clan is not ready to do so, we part company," said Ole Kaiboi.

"If you have tentatively accepted a retreat, you will follow us later—more desperately than you are now," Ole Matiangi said "There you will loose all your herds and will only come back carrying empty calabashes." He gave his final verdict.

Kipsongol told us that the party got split into two. Some took to the southern direction as far as Narok. The other group first went north and later they settled near Tulwab Kony¹⁶ briefly before moving westward. During our last raid, as you know we found them at Orum. We waged a successful war against them.

Kipsongol went on, "Later on the Maasai passed Kavirondo through Kisii land having secured a peace treaty to pass through the said territories. They were devastated by then. They carried fresh tree branches, empty calabashes, and very few animals. Finally, they settled at Kilgoris."

He concluded by telling us that the southern Maasai moved far away and are no longer a threat to us. Therefore, the land of Uasin

¹⁵Warrior

¹⁶The present day Mount Elgon

Gishu was named after one of their clans. This land has remained uninhabited but acted as our warriors' zone."

After finishing his story, Kipsongol smiled at us in satisfaction.

7

So our journey continued. After a couple of days, we had passed through the land of Eldoret on our way to Sirgoit. At Sirgoit we camped for two days. There we had a good view of the area around us.

"Below that hill to the north of us are the Kaisaget hills. Earlier, at that place we had had an unexpected attack from the Marakwet during our last journey home from Kamoriongo. Those men thought we were children," I told my colleagues as we rested. "Just Imagine, how they ambushed us in that place. They wanted to steal our hard-won animals. What a people! They did not know what we had gone through in the process of acquiring our animals. We had nearly lost our lives. If we could defeat the Maasai, who were these Marakwet to attack us? Anyway, they had ambushed us in the Kaisaget hills with only spears and clubs—as though we were merely dogs or boys! We could see it was a hasty preparation. Maybe they were out on security missions and just stumbled upon us. We defeated them and continued with our journey homewards as if nothing had happened. We left many of them dead and some dying." I concluded.

"Then we must avoid this route on our return journey," somebody suggested.

While we were camping at Sirgoit, something bad happened. To begin with, our animals became sick and some died of a mysterious disease. That disease might have been caused by ticks. There were also poisonous snakes around. We made a prompt

decision to separate the sick animals from the healthy ones. To the sick animals we applied herbal medicine that brought very successful results. This problem hampered our movement for several days. Also, some of our warriors became sick with fever, and diseases of the stomach. We could all have been dead, but our knowledge of herbal medicine saved us.

Another problem we faced was food shortage. That was one of the reasons why our mates were slow to recover. We feared slaughtering the animals, which were recovering from their own sickness. At any rate, only a few animals were remaining. But the food we had in the reserve helped us a lot, especially the sick.

Our improvement eventually lessened our anxiety. We were able to decamp though we were tired.

As we moved on, our surroundings became wild. Lions and other meat-eating animals were very interested in our cows—these were our main food source for our survival. On many occasions they attacked even our men. But our journey progressed despite all these problems. We crossed River Moiben after so many hindrances on the way. We were now a few miles west of Cherangany Hills.

Having made a short journey from the river, we camped for the night. We ate a scanty meal and discussed the past events and how we should move forward. We were in need of rejuvenating our spirits.

Our elder, Kipsongol, began to talk addressing us as *Tipchu*.¹⁷ To address us as *Tipchu* was to protect us against the Evil Eye. “*Tipchu*,” said Kipsongol, “We have had a long journey and now to the West of us is *Tulwab Kony*.¹⁸ That is our destination. Our share

¹⁷Girls, a common way of addressing warriors during military operations.

¹⁸The present day Mount Elgon

of cattle is there. They are ours by right. It is time we roped in that ancestral honour. We do not see any reason why our children must suffer with famine while the children of Kony are bursting with plenty of milk. Oh no! My children will never starve during my lifetime knowing that our ancestral cows are within our reach.”

He stressed his point by thrusting his spear into the ground.

Then spoke Arap Sambai, another war veteran in our group. “Our aim, *Tipchu*, is to make our country prosperous with plenty. We are here to usher in those blessings. We have come all the way from the Nandi country and here before us are cattle, the basis of our mission. But it is not going to be easy. These Kony fellows are well armed. Above all, they are strong because they have been at home doing nothing apart from eating meat and drinking milk of the cows that actually are ours. If there is any coward amidst us, he should leave now, but cursed be he.”

No one left. We prepared for the night.

8

Early the next morning, three others and I were assigned the responsibility of spying ahead of the *Ng'anymetiet* group. We were to survey the route.

Before we crossed Chepkaitit River on our way to Seum, I noticed that a certain branch was hanging low, rather awkwardly. I stopped, stunned. What could have caused the branch to hang like that? An animal? I was not sure. Although my colleagues dismissed my suspicion, I still could not feel at ease. Unfortunately, it was dry season and no footprints could be easily found. But I knew that

something was terribly wrong. And, as I remember these events now in my deathbed, I knew I was dead right—unfortunately. But let me continue.

This is what may have happened after we crossed the Moiben River. The area lying to the immediate west of Cherangany Hills was inhabited by the Cheranganyiek and our other close cousins the Marakwet.

After our last raid on *Kamoriongo*,¹⁹ we had crossed their land successfully with our loot. We had also asked them to assist us with an axe to cut huge thorn trees as we had intended to remain there for several days. Our aim was to build a strong enclosure. They might have marvelled at our herds and might have envied us. Possibly this is what caused that war at Kaisaget. But their failure to capture our loot not only dismayed them but also put their security personnel into disrepute. It was possible from that experience that they assigned men the duty of safeguarding their territory. It might have been after we crossed River Moiben that a spy was watching us without our knowledge. He might have overheard of our plans and that morning wanted to ascertain our general direction. Possibly he was not alone but many of his companions were hidden in various places up the trees.

Had they also mustered warriors to ambush us near the river pass? Only time would tell.

9

Meanwhile—as I learnt later—life at home was not very easy. People were greatly worried for us. They felt utterly helpless because there was nothing they could do to assist us. It was already three

¹⁹The Maasai (see the previous chapter)

We Cried

moons since we had departed on that fateful journey. There was no news about us. Our mothers could not sleep as they had bad dreams about us. *Has my son been mauled by lions? Or gored by buffaloes? Or crushed by rhinos and elephants? Or swept away by fast moving rivers? Or killed by enemies?* Every mother in the village was continually haunted by these questions. Of course, nobody could say such things aloud, as evil spirits might hear the ominous words and make them happen. The distraught mothers suffered helplessly and wept in silence.

They had one small means of consolation, though. It was their waistbands. Again and again they tightened their waistbands as they remembered us. These bands had their own spiritual purposes. Every woman had to tie four knots in their bands that were only to be untied when the final news of our mission arrived. The waistbands gave them hope, and became objects on which the weeping mothers could make wishes and offer prayers. So our life was tied to our mothers' waistbands. Wasn't that wonderful!

The village elders also were equally worried about our welfare. Each day early in the morning they could be seen spitting ceremoniously towards the rising sun and crying out:

Asis, konech sopon
Asis, ripwech lagok
*Asis, Kasech kakisain*²⁰

Our fathers also met every now and then to inquire from the maotik²¹ of our expedition as well as what the *Orkoiyot* has detected through his spiritual intermediaries.

²⁰God, give us health.
 God, guard our children.
 God, hear us, we pray.

²¹Tribal seers

The fathers would offer intercession prayers as follows:

Asis, konech spon
Asis, tukwech lagok
Asis, kakisain ripwech lagok
*Asis, kakisain kaseech*²²

After these prayers, the fathers would share beer ceremoniously, and before drinking, each man would sprinkles some on the ground and the wall of the hut saying:

Oiik-chok kakisaak
Iro cho maiyo
Okenech spon
*Oripwech lagok*²³

Every meeting would end with blessings pronounced by an elder.

During our absence, nobody ever mentioned us by name because of fear of evil spirits. We were always mentioned as birds so that the benevolent spirits of our ancestors might protect us.

Also, to maintain the sanctity of our mission, only very few activities could take place, e.g. tilling, planting and harvesting, while some were indefinitely suspended, for example, circumcision. During that season, shedding of blood was considered a bad omen. Also

²²God, give us health.

God, cover our children.

God, we beseech you, guard our children.

God, hear us, we pray.

²³Our departed ancestors, we pray [to you].

Receive this beer.

Give us health.

Guard our children.

there was the common fear that if the circumcision candidates feared and wailed during the operation, it would be a bad omen.

So during our absence, all injurious activities were postponed indefinitely, except emergencies, for example, protecting the cattle against wild beasts and human enemies.

The whole tribe stood in solidarity with us as we were moving far away towards our dangerous target.

10

After several days of walking, we had passed Kapterit and crossed the rivers of Ainopmaget, and Kimoson. One evening we made camp at *Kata-lel*.²⁴ Life now was becoming unbearable. We had only two cows remaining. This meant eventual starvation.

During this time there were numerous complaints in our camp. We were already famished, and we were tired. To make matters worse, some of us were totally bored. Those who were going on a cattle-raid for the first time were greatly affected by this way of life.

Our garments were already showing signs of wear, and the heat of the sun was unbearable.

To add to those discomforts, our bodies and our garments were infested with lice. Never had I known that so many creatures could make their home in my body! *How come so many lice found their way into us and into our garments that were now reduced to tatters*, I wondered. Perhaps it was because we had shared the bush habitation with wild pigs and apes.

²⁴The present day Kitale

Due to all those disturbances, some of the younger warriors had begun to lose their sense of discipline. Some would even fight for the scanty food, something that had never happened before. Some also began to question the wisdom and guidance of our leaders. More and more jingling of ear jewellery could now be heard as they shook their heads in total dejection.

Despite all these obstacles our party moved forward. Later we changed direction from West to North towards *Em-Tebess*²⁵ to avoid the direct route to our destination. That shift of direction later cost us a lot of pain. Our journey progressed despite our fear of perishing from hunger. The question of how to feed the whole army of warriors was very disturbing. I was already sensing a mutiny, as our sense of discipline had become more tattered than our garments. But *Asis* and his providence saved us from many ugly situations. As we progressed, we found wild fruits, which we could pluck here and there and sustained ourselves. Of course, it would be foolish to dream of full satisfaction from this method of survival.

It was biting cold as we approached *Tulwab Kony*. Our feet now were numb and full of cracks. Somehow, that helped as we felt we could just walk without feeling anything in our feet!

After walking for several days, we at last arrived at the foothills of the mountain. *Asis* is great. As we were about to despair, we were blessed with honey in various beehives in the trees and on the ground. Our food hunters found very big beehives among the rocks, and it took us several hours to collect it. At last, our stomachs were swollen with honey, and our faces were swollen with the stings of bees. They stung us terribly as they found their way into our mouths hidden in the morsels of honey that we were hungrily swallowing.

²⁵The present day Endeless

We were counselled not to over-eat, as our stomachs were still weak because of the starvation so far. But the honey proved to be a real blessing. We were also lucky to find many edible leaves and fruits. We rested there for a couple of days.

Now Arap Sambai took full charge of the mission. He firmly had control of those who had begun to misbehave.

He said, “*Tipchu*”, We are now nearing our target, and our solidarity is very important. I understand the problems you have so far faced, but you should remember that acquiring a cow is not just as easy as drinking its milk.”

“Whoever is not ready to persevere at this time of our mission, should go back to his mother’s *Chepkauyet*.²⁶ Or else, we shall eat him. What is the loss of one man anyway in the whole tribe? Our fathers travelled for many years in search of cattle and they came back successfully with livestock. Sometimes, they were in the wilderness for as long as two years. They did not die of hunger and yet here you are, grumbling like kids.”

“Our fathers who are waiting for us at home, raided the Maasai successfully, when they were of the uncircumcised age-set of *Sawe*, and brought back many cattle. This embarrassed the warriors at home so much that they wanted to massacre the triumphant home-comers. However, their plans were thwarted when the elders intervened. The victorious boys had graciously shared their hard-won animals among themselves at home. How these youngsters captured the animals by waging a successful war against the feared Maasai warriors has remained a mystery. But one thing is clear. These boys were accompanied by elders, and they listened to the elders’ advice.”

²⁶Petticoat

“You should know that women and boys at home are awaiting with anxiety the outcome of this mission, and your failure will bring great shame to your home.”

“Whoever does not accept to be led by us, your elders, as some of you showed on the way, should now stand and go back home, and we will curse him to perish on the way.”

When Arap Sambai ended his fiery speech, he was seething with anger. He was so dismayed by the shameful attitude of some of us that he was already regretting why he had accepted the responsibility of leading us.

“Not only will we curse the betrayer, but we will finish him off with our swords,” a warrior shouted.

Nobody again complained or disobeyed orders.

Late that night we ate the little we had, drank water, and slept in turns as usual. But this was to be the night of nights. First it was very hot. So we fell asleep exhausted by the day’s events. Our jungle-camp was warm and comfortable but we were not going to be comfortable for long.

We were rudely awakened from our blissful sleep by a heavy downpour. It was a powerful storm. Soon we were shivering, the ground was wet, and it appeared that some of the trees or their branches were going to fall on us. So, apart from being drenched, we were in danger of being crushed to death. It is hard enough to defend yourself against enemies and animals, but it is much harder when you are under falling trees in a cold, dark night.

It threatened our lives. For the first time, I began to ask myself whether all the cattle in the world would be worth my life. Why was I killing myself?

That night was horrible. By the following day we found, to our great sorrow, that two of our colleagues had passed away silently. Possibly they had weak hearts and lost hope in the battle much earlier. Some were too sick and already at a point of joining their departed ancestors in the spirits' land. Just imagine, never were they to see their families, nor receive the fruits of our mission.

But as things proved to be later, they were luckier, even though they had died like dogs in the wilderness.

Our elders' wisdom surely failed miserably. Just imagine the saying *nda ngebarin keborjin tany*.²⁷ As I am nearing my grave, and look back, I doubt if that is a sound saying. I mean, does it matter, when you have a cow or not when death comes? But then there we were in that drenching jungle, moaning for our departed friends while we were still hoping of owning cattle through death. Surely we could be doing something more profitable at home than perishing in this wilderness. But here we were on a mission ready to kill our kinsmen so that we might get rich with their fortune. Who said that animals were worth more than human life?

That fateful day I recalled another saying *kerke kipset ak kiptep*.²⁸ It appealed to me more than ever before. A man was at home planting millet and sorghum and on our arrival from raids we would barter our animals for his food. So the home-staying farmer acquired cattle in a much simpler way, while we risked our very lives for the sake of the same cattle. One good example was the last raid to *Kamoriongo*.²⁹ True, we brought cattle but within no time they had been finished by *kipkaiteet*.³⁰ What was the point of endangering our lives to gain perishable goods? The Kavirondo war

²⁷If you must be killed, it should be for a cow.

²⁸There is no difference between a home-stayer and a raider.

²⁹The Maasai (See the previous chapter)

³⁰Anthrax

had left over four hundred men dead.³¹ What was the use of the cattle they had brought? No one enjoys cattle in the Land of Sheu.

These thoughts made me take a solemn vow never to kill a human being for the sake of cattle.

I thought of Arap Mulwo. He had two sons and four daughters. He did not allow his sons to accompany us. He married off his daughters and was paid dowry. He became rich. Why didn't I remember that wisdom meant raising foodstuff rather than perishing in the jungle? But this old woman of mine—the former beautiful girl Chesondin—had forced me to just perish like that. Imagine that she had declared that a fellow who owned no cow from a cattle raid could not marry her. Had I known that one day she would grow old the way she is now, surely I would not have bothered to please her at the risk of my life. She now is as toothless as I am. But long, long ago it was she who hijacked me into that mission. And now she has joined my sons in complaining that our house smells of urine!

I also thought of the *Orkoiyot*.³² I recalled how during the elders' meeting, Telenges had placed the *Orkoiyot*'s club reverently on the ground to remind us that our mission had been dedicated by the Chief Elder. That night shivering, in the jungle, I remembered that club and thought there was nothing really special about it. It could not save us in a war of spears, diseases, stormy rains and falling trees.

³¹See Section 1 of Chapter Four

³²The Chief Elder

11

After we had laid our departed friends to rest in peace, and knowing the presence of hyenas, and too grieved in our hearts, we proceeded in the southern direction. Our thoughts now were so distorted that we were no longer as daring as before.

We had thought that our destination would be near, but alas! There were so many ridges to cross. We ascended and descended so many hills just to cover a short distance. The problem of hunger and fatigue killed our morale further. When at long last, we came out of the hills, we found ourselves facing a thick jungle. We now had succumbed to fate.

For many days, nothing happened, and we did not see any sign of human habitation. Our souls were tortured because of this unending journey. Grumbling began all over. We, the spies, were now full of fear, as we learnt that if we failed to spot the Kony animals, then surely our warrior colleagues would pin us to the ground with their spears. This was true. Those brutes were no longer human beings, as they were more hairy than monkeys. The only difference was that they did not have tails, which was hardly a consolation.

Late one afternoon, after we had been on that mountain for a whole month, the elders and leaders of our group held a war-council. It took place after we had taken our scarce meal. The going had certainly got tough as the warriors faced imminent death by hunger. After a long discussion the elders and the leaders concluded that there was no point in advancing further. But we, the warriors, were in no mood of returning empty-handed from this point of our mission. Returning now would mean that we had endured all these tortures for nothing. I begged the elders to allow us to move on. I was

convinced that we would come to the *irimet ab kapkwambisi*³³ in a day or two, but the elders simply laughed at my zeal for war.

Their major problem was how to counsel the warriors against the futility of pursuing with this suicide mission. This counselling was to be done in the morning.

“If this mission comes to nothing, then surely I will spear one of the fellows to death,” groaned a warrior as he prepared to sleep. He thought how he had wasted a lot of his time suffering for nothing in the wilderness. He was already beyond recognition, and in tatters. He could not see himself appearing at his home with nothing, even a lamb to boast of. “How will I ever stand the shame?” he kept on saying.

“I have always said that the *Orkoiyot* Kimnyole is a great impostor. How could he send us on a useless mission like this one?

I am sure that the wizard wanted us to perish in this mission. I don’t know what the *Orkoiyot* would gain from our deaths,” complained another warrior as he clicked his tongue to show his bitterness.

“You remember that a few years ago he sanctioned a raid on Kavirondo in which out of four hundred men who participated only two arrived to tell the horrid tale. I have said that he is bogus but no one seems to believe me. The old men at home worship him as if he is a god. A god indeed! A god who cannot see! Do you know what he said?” The warrior who spoke these words seemed too tired to answer to his own question. We all waited patiently for him to continue. “He said that in the *irimet*³⁴ we were to find a huge black

³³The Fortress of Kapkwambisi

³⁴Fortress

ox and a white heifer. Where are they now?" The warrior made a sweeping gesture with his hand as if to look for those animals in the surrounding darkness. I tell you, if ever I will arrive home safely, with my bare hands I will show him "*mat ab Arap Belat*."³⁵ The warrior was in a serious mood to dispatch Kimnyole, the Chief Elder, to the Land of Sheu.

Another warrior was thinking how he was to miss marrying his sweetheart because dowry was not forthcoming. Failure to accomplish this mission successfully was as good as kissing her goodbye. Turning from his uncomfortable ground, he said, "I will kill him, I vow." He did not say whom, but I knew that he meant me. It was very disturbing for me, this thought of being killed by my own colleague. I felt that I was at his mercy. I thought of escaping out into the surrounding darkness, but recalled the lions that were lurking there. I made a decision to fight to the end, as I knew that the fellow was ready to sacrifice me to satisfy his ego. For many days, he had had a grudge against me. I felt all the more distressed to realize that if this fellow indeed killed me, then the other warriors could not care less.

So I made up my mind to fight to the end. I thought that, with a few understanding fellows, we could still undertake this mission. I preferred to face enemies rather than being slaughtered by my fellow warriors, or escaping homewards in defeat. I remembered the story of a courageous man who had accompanied the warriors on a cattle-raid to a certain land. The process turned bitter and most of the warriors were killed. He was left with a few men while they were still far away from home. His remaining friends died from one way or another. After many months in the wilderness, he arrived at home naked and without even a weapon. So I made up my mind to follow his example.

³⁵The fire that killed somebody's son

But then the saying “*ngemechi ano ketogosune ano*”³⁶ also preoccupied my mind again and again. And so I began to think of running away. Yes, I was brave enough to pursue the mission to its end, but I still feared taking somebody’s life. I was a confused man. I decided to take the advice of my closer associates like Kipsugut and Kibiwot.

And then something happened that made our hearts to skip a beat. We heard a donkey braying.

A donkey, by God! Where did it come from? Of course, nobody could imagine a donkey living in that lion-infested area. A donkey could not build a fortress, could it? No. Everybody was sure that not far away was a human habitation. The presence of a donkey seemed to confirm this. And wherever there is a donkey there must be cattle, sheep and goats. What a blessing!

All of a sudden, sorrows were swallowed; ill thoughts were buried as everybody whispered in great relief and gratitude, “*Asis! Asis! Asis! Asis!*”

Arap Sambai asked in a whisper, “Did you also hear what I heard or my ears are playing a trick on me?” Everybody answered in unity, “We heard what you heard and may *Asis* bless us.” He said, “All is well then, and let us rest in peace. *Asis* has guided us.”

12

Meanwhile, people at home had already despaired, as nobody actually knew what had happened to us. Even the *Orkoiyot* now seemed to have lost control of his powers, though he still gave assurances. It was already five months since we had left. The *Orkoiyot* had done

³⁶Wherever you die, does not matter

his divinations, but nothing clear was forthcoming. All that he said was that we were safe and would be coming soon. At least that was good news, but to what extent? Nobody knew.

Back to the mission, what we did not know, but would learn later, was that many activities were taking place in the land of Cherangany. Many warriors were amassing at Moiben River where we had planned to cross. Spies had taken their positions as far as *Kata-lel*³⁷ to monitor our return journeys. The Marakwet, our cousins, are well known warlike people not only in their experience in war but also in the way they prepared poisonous arrows. And of course, they were ready to use them against us.

They knew that we were to avoid the earlier route through lower Moiben towards Barsombe plains. They must have seen our spies surveying a crossing point commonly used by elephants and buffaloes. It was a broad area meaning that the water was much shallower. That is where they waited for us without our knowledge.

13

Early the next morning our camp was a beehive of activity. It was going to be a busy day. Sacrifices to Asis were to be offered and spies had to be sent out. The main problem was finding the correct direction. The sound of the wind in the forest cheated the ears about its origin. But this could not stop us from working. About ten of us were selected to do the job.

We moved forward, cautiously. Soon we merged with the trees and other vegetation as though we were part of the forest. We moved like ghosts. The saying "*kibendi mutio machei keel*"³⁸

³⁷The present day Kitale

³⁸To walk so silently that the sounds of the steps cannot be heard

became a reality, as we moved forward. Dry wood was never disturbed and no sound at all was heard. Even the sound of leaves falling from trees was louder than our steps. A cat would have envied our ability to move in such graceful silence.

As we moved quietly through many ridges and valleys we saw no sign of any habitation. We became confused and uncertain. *Did we indeed hear a donkey braying or some ghostly trick of the night?* I whispered, "Surely we heard a donkey bray last night from this direction."

"Maybe our ears did not hear well." Someone whispered back. "But everybody heard it in the camp from the same direction." Another protested in a whisper.

As we crouched making further plans, a dove fluttered over us as if a foreigner had invaded its domain. Our hearts skipped a beat as we saw four men moving towards the opposite direction carrying a heavy load of meat as they talked jubilantly in low tones. One was praising his trap that had never failed him.

We followed the men at a distance. The four unaware of us moved carelessly while at times almost dragging the carcass of meat as we watched with interest. It was as if our lives depended on them. Surely they were. To us they represented a pointer to wealth, prestige, and families.

We followed them as cunningly as a predator follows its prey. Soon our patience paid as we came to the *irimet*.³⁹ Unaware, the hunters had led us to their guarded home comprising of livestock, men, women and children.

³⁹Fortress, also referred to as *Ngorit*

Peeping from higher ground, we saw monstrous men, huge and fat cattle, goats and sheep. We also saw many donkeys. Personally, I do not care about donkeys. But these were different. Those donkeys before us had become our source of hope and inspiration. They had saved us from shedding one another's blood and aborting our mission. If the inhabitants had known what those donkeys had done to them, they would surely have massacred those creatures.

There were the usual activities as in every nomadic homestead. Women were busy milking cows, assisted by young boys and girls. Men were inspecting the animals for diseases and ticks.

I noticed that the gates to the fortress were very strong. It took those monstrous men a lot of time to open them. It involved removing several poles and untying several ropes. Having done so, a bridge was lowered to connect the fortress with the outside world. Near the gate was a huge tree with a lot of strong branches. It had many purposes. One, it supported many beehives. The bees provided security to the fortress. Whenever enemies were sighted, the beehives were disturbed to arouse the bees. Who could stand before angry bees? Two, a branch running across the moat could be used as a bridge. Only that it never touched the ground but high above the ground level. Men could climb the tree, move along the branch, and using a rope they carried, they dropped at the other end of the moat. From that end they received strong ropes tied to the bridge connecting the fortress with the outside world.

This was one of the most secure villages I ever saw in my life. I envied it.

As we watched, donkeys, cattle, sheep and goats were led out while their young ones remained behind. We watched herdsmen and warriors getting armed for their normal duties as mothers fed

their families with fresh milk. Our saliva dripped as we watched helplessly the enjoyment of those people.

But drinking milk was not our goal. We were there to acquire the source of the milk!

For many hours, we watched various activities that took place in the village. Women were busy doing various chores as children played around. The aged were moving laboriously as they visited their friends. Nobody was aware of our presence. I began to feel pity for these people. They had not harmed us and yet we were going to harm them. I even felt tempted to warn them of our presence. But then I also remembered that my colleagues were brutes with no human feelings at all, and would kill me without blinking an eye, if I showed any sympathy towards the enemy. I wept in silence over my inability to save these people. This inability has continued to haunt me all my life and I know that I shall carry this burden with me to the spirits' land. I have often blamed myself for failing to save my Kony cousins. As I look back, I feel that it would have been better for me to die on their behalf than to raid them just to get some cows.

Having made the necessary observations, we returned to our base.

By afternoon we arrived back at the camp. We made a detailed report of everything we saw, especially the fortress with its strong gate, fence and the tunnel. Our colleagues at the base asked many questions and we answered them to the satisfaction of all.

Final preparations were now made. Since the Kony appeared satisfied with their security, as we had earlier on found, it appeared unlikely that they would be moving out of their fortress at night. So we thought that sentries to guard our camp at night were also

unnecessary. This brought about our decision to slaughter our remaining two cattle for food in the evening. Their meat was to be roasted after midnight in the jungle after ascertaining the general direction of the wind. We did not want the wind to betray us.

Arap Sambai said, "*Tipchu*," we have heard through our own ears that at long last we have arrived at our destination. What we came for is available for us to grab and lead away as we wish. We have been told of the strong fortress, which to me is a simple matter. "This is how we are going to do it," he continued, "We shall move further into the jungle where we hope to be safe. There we shall rest after feeding ourselves on the remaining meat. Tomorrow afternoon we shall start walking slowly towards the fortress. In the evening, we will have arrived there. We will divide ourselves into three groups according to the number of gates. As they close their gates an hour before dusk we shall attack them. We shall prepare arrows with fireheads to do the job. Without them knowing, we will shoot at their fence and grass thatched houses using flame arrows as burning torches. As the fire consumes them, they will be forced to open the gates to save their animals and families. This will give us the opportunity to enter the fortress. There will not be much problem. We will find them armed with no more than sticks," he concluded.

"Also as you were counselled at home," Kipsongol said, "I ask you never to kill anybody. Our mission is to grab part of their animals. Let us not hurt our cousins. The smoke from the fires will make the whole area dark and this will cover us as we enter. Furthermore, our sight alone will create the greatest fear and confusion in them. We are more of gorillas than human beings. And before they recover we will have gone far away."

"This is the plan," another war veteran offered, "The *Ng'anymetiet* group will attack at all points. Their duty is to disarm those fellows. The *Samburto* group will collect animals, as we will

have subdued them. They are to lead them away as swift as lightning. The *Ng'anymetiet* group will cover them as they lead the way. The *Oldimdo* group will remain behind to ensure that there is security for *Samburto* from the rear."

"Now comes the most difficult part," another war veteran took over, "You must be wondering what would happen if a real war broke out which might lead to the loss of many lives. Here's my answer. Your swiftness and your appearance will baffle these people. Before they make a decision of waging war, we will have gone far.

"But let me remind you that even if you are attacked, never kill anyone because that will be murder and we shall have to bear the curse for it. Remember that these people also are our brothers.

"Since the *Oldimdo* group is the last to leave, may I warn you against going wild. Never loot their homes. Some of our warriors have done this kind of thing during the past raids. They were caught like flies. Never rape any woman. It is an abomination. Never kill their animals. Never kill any human being even if you are attacked." He concluded.

"I advise you to leave behind an equal share of animals. Our responsibility is to collect our share but not to lead them into an impoverished life." Kipsongol added.

As elders continued to brief us on our mission, my mind was far away. "I was wondering about the sharing of the animals between us and our target. How were we to know that we had taken an equal number of animals? But that was not a major problem. The problem was that my colleagues had already adopted a different attitude. Their heads were shaking negatively towards what the elders were saying. It seemed that the warriors did not like the ban

on excessive behaviour imposed by the elders. The warriors seemed bent upon having a good time doing what they pleased. They kept on shaking their heads and the sound of the jingling of their earrings drowned the soft voice of the elders.

So I was foreseeing a problem being created by my fellow-warriors. The more I observed them, the more I became convinced that they were bent on evil. Nothing could change their haughty attitude. As soon as they would see that the cattle were within their reach, they would forget all the elders' advice and go their own way. All I knew was that there was to be no fair sharing of the animals. Those people were not only ready to grab everything but also kill whoever dared stop them.

I began to hate myself for participating in this mission and joining these worthless fellows.

Finally, Arap Sambai suggested that we look for a dense patch of forest so that we can hide there and make the final preparations. The briefing ended.

14

Most of that afternoon we relaxed. Some of the warriors were asked to skin the animals while some were sent on a hunting mission. The result from hunting was very encouraging. One of the parties brought a reasonable amount of honeycombs, which we ate joyously. It gave us a lot of strength. The other party was fortunate to kill some huge wildebeests that we ate raw.

At night, we made fires, which were used in roasting the meat from our cattle. Having done so we ate part of roasted cattle meat to supplement honey and raw wildebeest. The remaining meat was hung on the tree branches.

My friends talked excitedly in whispers, but with me things were different. I had read the signs of rebellion among my colleagues, which gave me a sense of apprehension. Some of my friends talked of their home life.

Two of them were comparing their girlfriends. The rest snored in sleep. Finally, I too was asleep. I may have slept soundly that night had it not been for a dream that later disturbed me. In it, I saw us being chased by a monster. I was lucky with some others to climb a tall tree, but many were captured by the beast, which swallowed them whole. The monster could also climb the tree as I saw my friend much lower than me in the same tree being captured and swallowed. I woke up with a start as somebody was shaking me violently saying that I was disturbing him.

For many hours, I was awake wondering what this weird dream could mean for us. Anyway, as the dawn was breaking, I had another heavy sleep till the time when the sun was high in the sky.

15

The Day of War.

That morning and early afternoon we prepared ourselves. We had to dye our hair and bodies with coloured soil. We had to ensure that our weapons were in the correct order.

Before our departure we ate the remaining roasted meat, wild fruits and honey to our satisfaction. We knew that getting another meal if at all we were to come out alive, would be two days later after putting a clear distance between the mountain and us.

In the evening, we decamped.

As the cattle were arriving back into the fortress, we watched all the activities that were taking place there. We divided ourselves into three groups. One group was posted near the gate of the fortress. Every leader was carrying firebrand.

One of us, with his mouth open, stared in bewilderment at the marvelous herds. He exclaimed, "*Aboitab acheri!* Is that really a cow, or a buffalo?"

I noticed that my fellow warriors were each embracing the *Orkoiyot's*⁴⁰ club as a means of gaining protection. I never did. I just wondered how a piece of wood could give us protection. We moved towards our posts. In preparedness of the raid we had muzzled our thigh bells to ensure total silence of our movements.⁴¹

Two of the warriors had their mouths wide open and their hearts thundering excitedly as their eyes were fixed on such wonderful cows. "Since I was born I have never seen such animals. Don't you think they are buffalos?" One asked as he nudged his neighbour to attention.

"Surely they are wonderful," one said, "I never knew that our cousins had such cattle from our share."

"Actually it has been a waste all the way through." The other young man responded as his wrinkled face was in deep thought. "I wish lightening could kill all these misers. Had they been considerate, they would have shared some of their wealth with their other cousins. Then I would not have to be in the wilderness waging this war to claim my share."

⁴⁰The Chief Elder's

⁴¹The noise made by these thigh-bells was used as a war tactic. During spying missions and other secret movements these bells were kept muzzled. They would be un-muzzled during a lightening raid to startle and scare the enemy.

The other one spat towards the direction of the fortress as a sign of his total hatred towards the fortunate people.

“I must collect our share or else I am not the son of Arap Sugut.” His face was contorted in daring determination.

An hour before dusk we were ready for action, as life in the fortress was at its usual ease with no sign of people thinking that enemies had surrounded it.

Then something unexpected happened. Never did we know that some Kony sentries were still out of the fortress from security duties. They may have stumbled upon one of us.

The sentries had lost no time in informing their people of the enemies around. They bypassed the route already manned by our warriors. We saw that the gates of the fortress were opened slightly to allow the sentries in. Then the gates were re-closed tightly and from within the fortress a war cry arose. Men within the fortress were getting armed.

Immediately our man blew the *Kudu* horn, but it was too late. As we un-muzzled our thigh bells, and charged forward, the gates had been closed and the bridges had been pulled in.

As we approached the gates, we met the biggest obstacle ever in our lives. First the bees ambushed us. Soon each of our warriors had a swarm of bees to handle. Unfortunately, that was not all. Arrows from the fortress darted towards our direction as the swarms of bees attacked us. Then, through our speech, our cousins came to know who we were, which made things worse for us.

The use of the poisonous arrows was extremely destructive. Once somebody had received even the slightest scratch, the victim

was dead. Before long we had suffered heavy casualties. We retreated to a safer distance.

Despite our heavy losses, we were still determined to conquer our enemies. I somehow began to feel remorseful about the whole mission. What was the point in losing our lives for the sake of some cattle?

For the first time so many thoughts were running through my mind. Though owning cattle was prestigious among our people, but the mode of acquiring them was extremely risky. Just imagine our situation. Death was staring us in the face. How would my girlfriend ever understand this? An elder had once said, "War has no eyes." We now realised how true it was. Death would not differentiate between a betrothed man and a family man, or a raider and a defender.

As I thought about these things, a full moon arose behind the trees.

I thought of Kingo, the ancestral father of our people. I felt that the spirit of Kingo was distressed to witness what we, his children were doing, ready to kill one another just for a few heads of cattle. My heart grieved as I muttered: "*Oiyo! Oiyo! Oiyo! Oiyo lagocho mengech! Oiyo kapkuugo! Oiyo kapkuugo!*"⁴² I promised myself never to hurt anybody again even if it meant being killed. Unfortunately, my friends were determined to go on with this bloody war.

Arap Kitongo was in full control then. "Do not get swayed to fear these people. After all, they are all women. Soon you will see these cowards running away like dogs with their tails between their

⁴²Sorry! Sorry! Sorry! Sorry, ye infants! Sorry, grandfather's family!

legs. May lightening burn them all!” He was clearly very depressed. The mistake of our identity being discovered had completely disarmed him. He knew that he could not avoid being cursed to death.

“So it is you Nandi people who are to kill our children. May lightening strike you dead!” Shouted a Kony elder. “What a death you are! May you perish forever!”

Meanwhile, the warriors were trying to gain strength by kissing the *Orkoiyot's* club. Then they prepared torches to attach to their arrows, in readiness of the fierce attack.

I thought of the lovely children whom I had watched during the spying mission, running around naked, playing and singing. They reminded me of my own younger brothers and sisters back at home. I felt pain as I realised that some of these children would now become orphans. Some could be maimed or even killed. I recalled with a shiver how after a previous raid, the whole area had been littered with corpses. A baby was found still sucking the breast of its dead mother, its voice hoarse with crying. I wished I could save these Kony children, but knew that it was too late now.

16

The fortress was very silent.

After ensuring that all was well, the warriors, led by Arap Bar-Keiyo, gave signals. Soon burning arrow shafts were seen flying in the air. The family of Arap Bar-Keiyo later came to be known as “*Kap Mwokto-Maat kwo Kesiok.*”⁴³ The few grass thatched

⁴³The family that shot fire onto the roofs

houses and “*the korikab kumalisiek*”⁴⁴ were ignited. Also the *irimet*⁴⁵ was burnt at various points plunging the enclosed village into total chaos.

“Wui! wui! wui! Our children!” wailed sorrowful mothers as they watched the fortress, huts and dry grass burning heavily. Each mother was aware of one thing. There was no hope of deliverance now. Their small belongings including the lives of their children would be consumed by it. “May lightening kill you also!” They cried out in tears. “You have come to kill us for nothing. May poisonous snakes bite you! May your children also perish!” They cursed us as they ran around for their own safety.

Men, women and children were running into every direction. Some men were trying to save their animals by driving them to safer quarters. Some women were struggling to save their children and other property by transferring goods to the *kebenet*.⁴⁶ Then came the big disaster. The Kony warriors in desperation opened one of the gates and as soon as they had restored the bridge that all hell broke loose. Both parties met. One was ready to capture the *irimet*, while the other was defending it at all costs. The Kony were confused at the frightening appearance of the intruders. We were disguised as animals.

A full war ensued.

Many huts had been razed to the ground thus trapping many infants and the aged inside, while some were stampeded to death by frightened animals. As huts collapsed, both the aged, the children,

⁴⁴The houses with the cow-dung plastered walls. Cow-dung being an inflammatory material, this type of houses would be susceptible to fire hazards.

⁴⁵Fortress, also referred to as Ngorit

⁴⁶Cave

the women and some men among the Kony sought refuge in the cave, while some fought with us.

Soon the *irimet* fell to our warriors. The war had left many people dead and injured on both sides. The captured animals were sped away by the *Nganyemetiet* and the *Samburto* groups. The *Oldimdo* platoon remained behind to disarray any chase by the Kony. I remained behind to make sure that no further life was wasted again.

“Please! Please! Murenju, let us leave these people alone. Don’t you see that they have had enough? They are desperate, having lost their animals, and also their huts have been destroyed by fire”. I besought my friends to depart from that dying community. The more I saw dead bodies sprawling all over, from both sides, the more I suffered. In disgust, I vomited the little food I had earlier eaten.

A distance away there was a swollen body of a middle-aged man that I knew could burst anytime, because of the poison of the arrow that had struck him. I did not want to see this gory scene.

“But they are shooting at us,” somebody said looking at me sternly. To him I was mad by showing sympathy to those in the cave. “But they are in the cave and most of them are the aged, children and women. Do you want to hear their curses to destroy us on the way?” I tried to reason it out, although I knew that it was too late.

As we were preparing to leave, aware that the rest of us had gone far, we were attacked by the men who had entered into the cave with women and children. This prompted us to do something that would bring about a curse on us.

Our men decided to counter-attack. It was a very wrong thing to do so. In the cave were the aged, the infants, pregnant mothers and other helpless beings. Even though I pleaded with our warriors to leave the cave alone, none paid any attention to my counsel.

My colleagues threw burning torches into the cave and fanned smoke with their shields so that it blocked the entrance. Soon those inside the cave began to die of suffocation and heat. People have never forgotten this cruelty. Later, the *kebenetab tuigut*⁴⁷ was created and has borne a testimony to that destruction to this day.

From the cave, ensued wails, groans and curses.

*Ngot ko mi chi ne bo kipiegen, iip lopcho.*⁴⁸ Each man in the cave was cursing the Nandi warriors. My clan of Kipkenda was also mentioned. I cursed the day I was born. One aged elder emerged mysteriously out of the burning fire, and with his hoarse voice he cursed the aggressors. He committed us to destruction as he wailed for the destroyed innocent lives of infants, pregnant mothers and other helpless people and animals. I had never thought that one day I would witness such wanton destruction of my blood relatives the Kony. My consolation to this day has been that I never hurt anyone myself. I praise *Asis* for it

For many days that curse continued to haunt me though my colleagues remained in a celebration mood. As we ran to join the rest, I felt like going back to rescue my dear innocent cousins. The curse of destruction on my clan by the desperate people disarmed me completely. I felt that I had become like a walking corpse. My friends were rejoicing over the cattle they had acquired. But at what cost! We had lost so many lives, and we had destroyed our

⁴⁷A black cave entrance. This monument is present even today in the division of Cheptais in Mt. Elgon district, Kenya.

⁴⁸If there is anybody from Kipiegen clan, may you perish on the way!

cousins. We left them in complete poverty and never were they to enjoy their animals again. The widowed, the orphans and the aged had suffered most as they counted their losses. For a complete week, I was drenched in tears and bitterness. I continued to remember the saying “*matyechei ngwonet ye mami korotik.*”⁴⁹

Many discovered that their brothers or other kinsmen had gone and mourned silently without showing their tears.

Kipkogei had lost a brother and a stepbrother. “So they are no more, or where are they? *Bwo! Bwo! Bwo!* What will I tell our parents? You see, they were still unmarried and have no roots or suckers at all. They have perished forever. No child will ever be named after them.”

He lamented bitterly at having lost the most energetic young men who were dependable at home.

17

For the whole night, we ran like mad people. In a way, we *were* mad. Sane people would not have done what we did. Two days later, we had crossed *Em-Tebess*⁵⁰ and later Kimoson River on our way arriving at Kapterit late in the evening. There we built an enclosure for the night. Our animals and we were so tired that nothing much happened. We stayed there for several days as we counted our gains and losses.

Three days later on our way to Seum, we came to what led to the loss of many lives of both animals and men. We found a very weak buffalo that could not defend itself. The warriors killed it easily.

⁴⁹A poisonous arrow never hits where there is no blood.

⁵⁰The present day Endebeess

As others ate the meat, some were fighting over its skin, which was good for making shields and shoes. Others, including I, were busy feeding our newly acquired animals.

We did not know that the buffalo was afflicted with *burasta*.⁵¹ Many of us got ill and died. Somehow the disease also spread among our cattle and many of them died as well. I felt that the curses of the Kony had already begun to take effect against us. This episode greatly hampered our return journey, as we laid many dead to rest. We had lost already half of our livestock leaving behind weak ones. Through herbal medicines, we managed to save the rest. Now we were left with only two hundred heads of cattle.

Our army was now reduced by half, and so was our livestock. We decided to make a hasty move out of that place. We were forced to leave some of our weak and sick colleagues behind. They would eventually die in the bush and become a feast for hyenas. It was sad.

As we came to Seum, we camped there. We rested and allowed some healing time for our cattle and ourselves. After three days, we resumed our homeward journey. We now felt refreshed and strong. Even our cattle seemed to have recovered from their earlier ordeal. As we could now drink the milk of our newly acquired cattle, we felt better nourished. We composed a song about the Kony people and the *burasta* disease. It seemed that we were past our troubles now.

Unfortunately, our relaxed attitude made us careless. We were no longer as cautious as we were before.

One afternoon before crossing the Chepkaitit River, I noticed something that made me to stop dead in my tracks. It was a fresh

⁵¹ Anthrax

human footprint. The person who made that footprint appeared to have gone in a hurry before us. After a careful examination of the footprint, I concluded that it belonged to an enemy spy.

I motioned in silence to Kipsugut. When he came close, I showed him, “Look at that footprint. It is very fresh. There is no one else around. What does that mean?”

“It certainly belongs to a human being and it may have entered into the thicket before us. But unfortunately even the leaves were never disturbed at all showing that he is a trained person. He must be a spy or a ghost.”

“But ghosts don’t make footprints.”

He made a keen observation of the area and confirmed my suspicion.

“It was made by a spy. It means that somebody has been spying on us. For how long, we don’t know. And for what reason, we don’t know either. We must better inform the others.”

When I informed the leaders about the footprint, they thought that it might have belonged to the *Cheranganyindet*.⁵² The person might have made that mark while hunting for honey. The leaders decided that we should continue with our homeward journey.

So we crossed that river and continued towards Moiben.

⁵²The Cherangany people, a Kalenjin tribe living along the Cherangany hills

Back at home—as I learnt later—people were very disturbed, as a lot of time had elapsed without any news of us. The elders had done many divinations, but to no avail. The aged minds were simply baffled. On several occasions the *maotik*⁵³ and other elders inquired from *Orkoiyot* of our fate. He would always assure them of our safety, though he could not say why we were late. Many felt that the old man had lost his powers. Yet hope remained the only alternative.

On many occasions the fathers and other elders met in the warrior's hut to comfort one another. Everybody was sad and worried. There was no sound of laughter, song or dance.

Our parents were especially afflicted by our absence. For many months they had looked towards the North hoping that a sign could assure them of our safety, but nothing happened. After every meeting, the elders prayed to Asis and our departed ancestors to give us protection. That was their only hope. During our absence, our names were never mentioned and we were referred to as birds. Even young children understood this and never made the mistake of calling out our names.

We crossed the land of Kapkonor-ket, and moved leisurely towards Moiben. We had identified a very good crossing point commonly used by buffaloes, rhinos and elephants. Here the riverbed was shallow, with overgrown bushes on both sides.

⁵³Tribal seers

A leading bull mooed, “*Moo! Moo! Moo!*” It stood firmly while gazing ahead as the rest prepared to dash for safety. Our minds thought of a wild creature, possibly a lion.

An elder behind us shouted, “Why are you not checking what the bull has seen? Let us move fast from this place I don’t like this area of Kapkonor-ket. It is full of mysteries.” Already he was sensing the looming danger. A shadow of death was approaching us fast.

And as we were preparing our animals to cross, and within the valley, all hell broke loose.

I first noticed a movement above us, in front of the valley that cut us off completely from crossing. Spears and arrows descended upon us from all ends that both animals and men were killed instantly.

But since we too were warriors we put up a stiff resistance. It baffled the Marakwet invaders who had planned a lightning raid.

However, they had a considerable advantage over us in that they were thoroughly prepared for it, while we were relaxed, fatigued, and unprepared for action. Moreover, they were perched on an advantageous high position and we were below which made us very vulnerable.

Our only advantage was the dust raised by the movement of our animals. As we shot our poisonous arrows at the Marakwet, we could see their corpses rolling down with arrows protruding from them. To this day, I have not forgotten that chaos. Bodies of men and animals were scattered everywhere. Some were dead, others dying. Some were groaning in fatal pain, others bellowing loudly of crushed limbs caused by the stampede of confused animals.

I, along with a handful of warriors, took cover in the clouds of dust and managed to evade death. This was after I had killed many people using poisonous arrows. At one time a Marakwet who had

rolled down confronted me. I threw my club at him. It not only killed him instantly but also pushed him into the river.

We plunged into the river it but that was hardly the solution. A good number of us got drowned leaving a few to swim across holding on to tails of cows. The river was bad, but it was our only choice. I had lost almost everything except my spear, my sword and a quiver of arrows.

We emerged from the river stark naked. We had only waist belts that supported our swords. On top of our nakedness our bodies were covered by a multitude of wounds. We collected our animals, and doubled our speed without looking behind for we knew of the consequences faced by the rest. My friend Kibiwot had a gushing wound on his back.

After a short distance Kibiwot became so exhausted that Kipsugut and Kiboit had to carry him, while two others and I led our animals. He had already lost much blood through his wound. Even though we had managed to control the bleeding, he felt extremely weak. I watched helplessly as my friend fainted.

Finally, we came to a stream. We used some broad leaves to scoop water and give him to drink. We also poured some water on his body. He regained consciousness, but continued to be in great pain. We applied a lot of crushed herbs on his wound, but his pain would not go.

He cried out, coughed and vomited blood. Then he fainted. We sat around him helplessly. After a while he struggled back and cried out like a child. At long last after a courageous war against death, this great warrior surrendered. His last whisper to me was, "*Or-nyo*."⁵⁴ Depart in peace."

⁵⁴Clansman

We shed uncontrollable tears as we watched our childhood friend take his last breath. The saying that death brings the courageous to their knees became true as we wept like children.

Our loss was great. We had been robbed of a strong man who had fought courageously to defend the land. He had earned a name for himself. Now all his dreams had come to nothing. His fiancée would not see him any more. I wondered about the meaning of life.

I began to hate them, our girlfriends, who drove us to our early deaths in the name of marriage. Were we to die like chickens for them? What a life!

Anyway, we were still far from being safe. So without delay, we laid our friend to rest under an acacia tree.⁵⁵ We covered him with adequate foliage as it was done at home. Because of our own insecure situation, we could not linger around much after the demise of our friend Kibiwot. So, after the disposal of his remains, we led our animals towards home. The animals were now only about thirty.

I do not know what prevented our enemies from pursuing us. Possibly they also lost many warriors and decided to retreat instead of coming down to the valley of death for our animals.

The way we had looted our cousins, the Kony, so we too were looted by our other cousins, the Marakwet. When I look back to those days now, I feel that cattle-raiding was actually a useless activity.

After walking for some days, we arrived at Sirgoit. Because of our exhaustion we decided to rest for a couple of days. We built

⁵⁵According to the ancient Kalenjin custom, the dead were not buried, but were “laid to rest,” quite literally, in the bush, to become food for wild animals. -Ed.

a very strong enclosure hoping that all could be well. But that was not to be. As we were leading our animals to our safe place, a lion ambushed us. Perhaps it had been following us for some time. It was too late when one of our colleague plunged himself between a cow and the hungry beast. The lion mauled him to death as he tried to rescue our cow.

Burning with anger and agony I speared the beast to death. Anyway, we secured the enclosure and later laid to rest our departed friend in a safe place. It was safe, as safe could be, for hyenas fought over his body that night and howled in satisfaction. We had no more tears to shed, as death had become our permanent companion since we left the Kony Mountain.

Kipsugut asked, "Will we ever reach home safely?" He doubted that we would.

Kipsongol looked at him as if seeing him for the first time. Young man, there is a saying "*ma igestoegei sekem pon.*"⁵⁶ We may be the ones to return home alive. Who knows? So take courage for we are not far from home. But then we still have many dangers to overcome on the way."

We were now only four left, and felt very insecure. We did not stay there long.

During that time, we had some sly companions, the hyenas, who were following us. To complete the picture, vultures were hovering over us as we walked. They seemed to know we were close to death. Also we could hear lions roaring around us. It was truly a death-march. Fortunately, we did not die on the way.

⁵⁶Not all bees migrate together from a beehive.

Late one evening, as the hyenas were becoming restless and vultures were desperate, we arrived at Ol'Lessos. I was about to collapse when our saviours came. We were rescued by our sentries at their out-post station. For a long time they had watched vultures circling in the air moving towards their direction and heard the noises caused by the howling hyenas. Finally, they came forward to check what was going on, only to sight something beyond their imagination. For a long time they could not recognize us, and kept a safe distance from us.

We cried out as we saw our rescuers.

They could not believe our story and were left shaking their heads in wonder. There before them were not warriors but apes with only a little human resemblance. Finally, our saviours came to terms with the truth that the four of us were the only survivors out of over four hundred strong, courageous men, real Nandi warriors, who had left early one morning to raid the Kony.

Our friends wept as they realised that the rest, friends and relatives, who had left with us, were no longer among the living. It was more than they could bear. Our appearance was a testimony to what had happened to us.

Later, they led us to their hideout where they built a very strong enclosure for our animals. Having made us safe, we were provided with tasty roasted meat from their hunted animals and then left to rest. The hyenas protested the whole night for having been cheated out of their meals. We slept like dead bodies till late the next morning when we arose. We were provided with roasted meat. After inquiring of our animals we dozed off again.

In the afternoon we told our whole story to our friends. They marvelled at the problems we underwent and were far from controlling their tears and in unity we mourned our departed warriors.

“What I have experienced, I don’t think I’ll ever come across again in my life,” one of us said.

“Good men have gone, and I don’t think whether the Nandi will ever have such people who were stronger than lions.” With tears, I narrated the whole story since we left home, especially the great raid and the valley of death. “Those men fought courageously to make our society prosperous. We had actually won over eight hundred animals from our raid, but those Marakwet the good for nothing people, waylaid us at Moiben. They killed and robbed us of what had remained after a disease attack among the animals.” I told them how my intimate friend Kibiwot had met his death.

Once again I recalled the saying “*kerke kipset ak kiptep*.”⁵⁷

“If Kimnyole was a real *Orkoiyot* he would have forewarned us instead of sending us on a disastrous mission which has seen so many warriors dead.” Kipsugut said while stroking his over-grown beard. “All along I knew him as a liar, and also as a thief who steals our fathers’ cows as payment for his non-existent powers and witchcraft. This useless man will never live to steal our cows again.”

Our friends nodded with approval sympathetically as they remembered how the elders revered him at home while actually he was powerless.

After resting for four days we departed again and finally arrived at Kaptumo having crossed the land Kipsigak and Kosoiywo.

Two days before we left Ol’Lessos, we had sent a couple of young men before us to Kaptumek where our people lived. They were to carry the message of our arrival to some special men. We had arranged to meet them at Kimaran.

⁵⁷The raider and the home-stayer are the same.

Two days after our arrival at Kimaran, the elders came. They could not control their tears at seeing our appearances. The elders could not believe the truth about our story. They received the sad news with groaning. Their few remaining teeth could be heard chattering as they covered their faces.

For a long time, they sat in silence, just coughing and wheezing. “How are we to inform our people at home of all these things?” They repeated that question. They later decided to inform other elders first. The next day they returned, as sorrowfully as they came. After waiting for one day, we also followed them. All of us were hanging vulture-heads around our necks as a sign that we had killed other human beings.⁵⁸ This meant that we had to undergo a cleansing ceremony at Kabujoi before we could be allowed to mingle with our clansmen and eat with them.

20

Meanwhile, Kimnyole, the *Orkoiyot*,⁵⁹ had seen signs and knew that all was not well. He had earlier looked into a pot full of beer and concluded that something beyond his control had happened. He had seen the bubbles in the beer rising and destroying one another and later leaving the scattered ones to settle. That revelation shocked him so much that he could not tell the elders the truth. He felt quite helpless now.

Two days later while he was resting under a tree, totally dismayed about the fateful mission, he received yet another horrifying

⁵⁸Compare this with allusion to a similar practice in Western culture in Stephen King’s *Dark Towers* series. It is interesting that the author’s mentioning of this custom is independent of King’s sources of information.
-Ed.

⁵⁹The Chief Elder and medicine man

revelation. He saw his dog, sleeping peacefully on the roof of his house. That spelt bad news. He knew that something terrible was about to happen to him. He realised that he was going to lose his position as the tribe's Chief Elder and seer. He was sure that the mission had failed miserably. He was an old man and knew that he could not escape, for the signs of death were there on his roof. Surely he knew that something not of his making had taken place and that he had to shoulder the blame. He grieved for his people.

Many times he said to himself, "*machutei ng'wonet ye mami koritik*,"⁶⁰ knowing that he had no guilt to bear. He had never sent men out on any errand except when they requested or demanded. He knew that he would be killed. But he was prepared to die knowing that he was innocent. He knew that when he was innocent, he had nothing to fear of the poisoned arrow, for it would return to the shooter.

21

Two days after the cleansing and purification ceremonies we had arrived near our village and there we spent the night with only the knowledge of our elders and the rescuers. Early the next morning a *Kudu* horn was blown several times to inform all people of an urgent meeting near the warriors' hut.

The sound of the horn had a distressful effect on people as they moved to receive the bad news.

After the usual greetings, mothers and the rest were informed, through many proverbs, of what had happened. As the reality sank into their hearts, the whole assembly was thrown into uncontrollable sorrow.

⁶⁰A poisonous arrow cannot enter where there is no blood.

Woi! Woi! Woi ! Woi! lagokyok! Woi, where do you go?

The early morning calm was shattered as mothers wailed for their sons perished in the war.

Bwo! Bwo! Bwo! Bwo we! Lagokyok (ye our children) what finished you? Are they animals or enemies? What killed you? What k....i....i.....i.....

A mother asked again and again as she fainted.

Wui! Wui! Wui! Wui my husband! My Husband! Wui my husband! Where will I go?

A young woman lamented as she realised that she already was a widow.

Iii! Iii ! Iii ! Iii! Iii ! My father, my father! Woi! Woi! Woi! My father!

A young girl cried as she remembered her beloved father whom she was to see no more.

Bwo! Bwo! Bwo! Bwo we! Murenju (ye men). We thought you would make our land prosperous.

Old men lamented, clapping their hands, "Who will defend our country now that you are gone?"

Many young men were writhing in fits of anger. Some were rescued from killing themselves. It was one of those gloomy days.

My three friends and I watched dumbly the mourning at our home of Kaptumek in Southern Nandi. We were the only survivors of the Kapkwambisi cattle raid.

An elder shouted again and again, “*Oiyo! Oiyo! Oiyo! Oiyo! Oiyo! Oiyo lagochu! Oiyo emoni!*”⁶¹ But none could pay any attention to him as women and children had become like lifeless bodies.

That lasted for several hours as old men continuously assisted the wailing mothers and children, carrying them to various shades and pouring water on the ones who had fainted. Later, when peace had been restored, I was asked to narrate the sad story of the failed mission from the beginning to the end. As people heard it, they sobbed, especially when I told them of the valley of death. As I narrated the story, I remembered everything that had happened, and cried.

As elders, women and children departed sorrowfully to their homes, the warriors gathered for a meeting.

Kipsugut stood and said, “*Murenju*⁶² allow me to speak before you on the matters relating to our sufferings. Many of our courageous people have gone before us through many sufferings in the wilderness. I am sure of one thing that nothing can happen without a cause. The man whom we revered so much as the *Orkoiyot* has failed us. I am defeated why he sanctioned this disastrous raid if he had all those powers to read the future. He should have foreseen everything that was going to befall our men before throwing them to the hyenas. Now that the land has lost many men, who will defend the land? Why did the *Orkoiyot* send our great warriors on such a wasteful mission as if they were rubbish?” He paused as his eyes streamed with tears.

⁶¹Sorry! Sorry! Sorry! Sorry, ye our children! Sorry, our land!

⁶²Fellow men

“*Murenju*”, echoed another, “Our ancestors said “*makiloktoi ngor cheput*,”⁶³ but we have one in our garments. The same caterpillar also sanctioned the raid to Kavirondo some years ago. We lost many people, and yet we did nothing to teach him a lesson. Also during his time, many calamities have afflicted our land. Many people died of *cheloleit*⁶⁴ and he just watched without giving us any prior warning or preventive measures.”

“This wizard must die so that he no longer misleads people to death. He has never gone on any cattle raid himself, and yet he has amassed so much wealth through telling lies. Now he must reap what he sowed. Let us go and put an end to his mischievous activities.”

The meeting came to an end.

Kimnyole, the *Orkoiyot*, was basking in the sun when warriors invaded his compound and without a word, clubbed him to death. And that ended his reign. However, many of his prophecies were fulfilled after many, many years. He had prophesied about the coming of white men who wore things like butterflies and the *iron snake*⁶⁵ that crossed the Nandi country.

23

There was a mourning period of several months. Although people in the village began to accept the reality, we the surviving warriors continued to suffer from the haunting memories of the suicidal raid.

⁶³One should not wear a garment with a hairy caterpillar in it.

⁶⁴Cholera

⁶⁵The Kenya-Uganda railway line passing through the Rift Valley

I remember that for many days I continued to think of my departed friends. I loved them so much. I will live to remember how jovial they were just hours before the tragedy, how they had met their deaths, and how they had wailed for help that never came. Being a spy I felt guilty of having led them to their early deaths. As I was continually tortured by these thoughts, my body became weak and thin, like a flower burnt by the strong sun.

My departed friends had had a dream of being prosperous, with large families and prestige ... only to end up being consumed by hyenas. Their sweethearts were destitute. For several days, these sorrowing girls would just stare at the horizon with their eyes full of tears. Somehow, they still hoped that their warriors would walk back from the valley of death. The healing of these hapless girls took many months.

The saying “*makitore nda-ra*,”⁶⁶ continued to come back to me as I thought of the failed raid.

I can never forget how my girlfriend Chesondin helped me in this trying time. She visited me almost daily to keep me company and give me moral support. She helped me to come out of my sorrow by her wonderful counsel and love that changed my life. She encouraged me to talk, and made me to repeat the whole episode through her unending questions. As I talked about it again and again, I felt a healing taking place deep within me.

Chesondin mothered me as if I was an orphan. And I was. Fate had robbed me of my dear friends. She cooked for me delicious meals in my mother's hut and served me with her own hands. She begged me to eat more and more and also made me to drink many gourds of milk. She brought water for my bath and oil to soothe my dry skin. Her soft hands massaged my body. Thus she gave me a

⁶⁶After a foolish action, comes remorse.

new lease of life and it sealed our love forever. I love her even now in my old age. I value her more than anything else in my life. She gave her love not only to me but also to our children in the years to come. She has been a wonderful mother.

The saying “*maki sorune kororia ma*”⁶⁷ sank into our hearts as we eventually accepted the reality.

Yes, our friends and relatives had perished in this raid and never were we to see them again. But we began to rebuild our life as months moved into years.

⁶⁷A feather cannot be saved from the burning fire

CHAPTER FIVE

A Dream Come True

1

Ariririririri ri ri ri rh!
Ariririririri ri ri ri rh!
Ariririririri ri ri ri rh!

An outburst of ululation from women went up into the air three times. These women had formed a *tetwa*¹ to prevent men from viewing the actual act of girls' circumcision.

It was like a dream! Immediately I saw that my senior aunt, the *motiriot*² emerged from the circle jingling over her head my thigh bells that I had given to Chesondin. She came towards me and there she gave me the good news that Chesondin had gone through it very courageously. She solemnly handed me the *kaboger*,³ that I had loaned my beloved for the ceremony. All this was part of the ceremony. Had Chesondin behaved cowardly, the presents could have merely been thrown in my direction. I received the bundle with tearful eyes as I vowed to make Chesondin my beloved wife.

¹A strong circle

²Godmother

³War garment

2

At long last, the time for the girl's circumcision ceremony had come. My sweetheart, Chesondin, was one of the girls to be circumcised this season.

I remember clearly the day she visited me to share her most cherished secret. Full of delight, she said, "*Chamanenyu*,⁴ at long last what the girls have been waiting for, has been accepted by the *maotik*.⁵ We will be circumcised at the next full moon."

"Will you be ready to face it courageously?" I teased her.

"If many have gone through it, why not me?"

"I am glad to hear that," I said, "If you turn out to be a coward, then my kinsfolk may not allow me to marry you." This was true. Which man would marry a coward woman? Even though I loved her dearly, but still could not accept her cowardice.

Women, who proved to be cowards during the circumcision act, were meant for old men and other women and not warriors of my standing.

3

Did I say other *women*? Yes. In our tribe a woman also had the right "to marry" another woman. This is how it went.

A barren woman could marry another woman in her old age just like a man did. Of course she owned part or whole of her

⁴My beloved

⁵Tribal seers

husband's estate depending on her status among the number of wives her husband had. If she was alone, she got all. Such marriages were meant to give the barren women a name and "make their fire lit." Such a woman could marry a young woman as I have said. But, obviously, she could not have sexual intercourse with her to produce children. It was an abomination even to imagine any sexual relation between one woman and another. A family man, generally from her husband's clan was approached to do the needful on her behalf but the children were hers. They called her grandmother and the breeder was not their father. He was just nobody!

A young woman, and one able to produce children, did not have the privilege to marry another woman. This privilege was reserved for old and barren women. As soon as the old lady married, she would cease playing the roles of a wife to her husband both socially and physically. She was now more of another man in the family enjoying the privileges as her husband. The husband could no longer sleep with her. How could he sleep on top of another "man?" Even the mere thought of such a thing was an abomination.

4

"I will never betray our love and your courage, and neither will I shame my kinsfolk," Chesondin said as she bit her lower lip. "Will you be ready to provide me with all the necessities during my circumcision period?" She asked.

"Of course, who else will do so?" I said.

"I knew you will never allow me to appear undecorated during those periods," she said.

From then on, various activities took place. I had to go round borrowing various beautifying objects for Chesondin, and some I

made myself. I informed my parents officially of my intention to marry Chesondin and preparations were put in motion.

Three days before the date fixed for the ceremony, many things took place. First, the girls were busy inviting their relatives, friends and neighbours to the circumcision celebrations. One could hear the jingling of their thigh-bells as they moved from one homestead to another. And at every home mock dances and songs were performed.

Wherever they visited, they were counselled on the value of courage and in other matters concerning marriage. In every home they were given the best food and hospitality.

Other young girls, with their songs and dances, also accompanied them. Through the songs the candidates were encouraged to persevere the pains during the act. And as the actual day approached, our girls were very excited about the great event.

A day before the ceremony, the candidates led by their *motirenik*⁶ went to a nearby stream for initial circumcision preparations. There, the virginity of the candidates was examined by the elderly women, who retained the results until the next day. Next, the girls were given a good bath after their godmothers had shaved their hair. That paved way to various ceremonies and spiritual activities that were to follow. To begin with, the shaved hair was collected and thrown toward the rising sun.

Later, during the day, their fathers were invited to smear their daughters with fat. Then the candidates were made to wear the arm-clamps worn by warriors. Also they were given a tobacco pouch which they hung around their necks.

⁶Godmothers

It was also during that time that I provided my girl with my war garment, more thigh bells, leglets of monkeys' skin, and my best club. My age-mates and close friends also gave her thigh bells which made my girl more adorned than the rest. She actually befitted a warrior of my status as I admired her with all my heart. They further performed the best mock war dance that I ever saw in my life.

Having attired themselves in men's garments and carrying clubs and flywhisks in their hands the candidates made a final round of visiting their nearest relatives and friends. Finally, Chesondin and the rest visited our home as she had earlier on informed me. They received a wonderful reception. After being entertained, I had a brief consultation with her. She told me of the early test and its results.

"Do you know that I will sit in my father's chair⁷ tomorrow?" She told me with happiness. That meant one thing, that she was a virgin. No woman could ever sit in an elder's chair unless she was a virgin. It was the biggest honour that a girl could bestow on her father. That signified the purity of the girl and her total honour to parents and kinsfolk and, above all, to her father's age-mates. I was so much overwhelmed by the fact that she was a virgin. That would prove that I had never abused her in any way and that she had never misbehaved during my absence. We fell into each other's arms and wept silently.

Finally she asked, "Are you ready to engage me tomorrow?"

"We are more than ready. I have already talked with my father and uncles this morning and everything is all right unless an unforeseen obstacle comes our way," I told her.

⁷The "chair" was actually a short three-legged stool used by elders

"I understand that our distant relatives have come and some are still coming with other suitors who would like to try their luck on me. But no one can win me now. I am already yours." She continued. "All my relatives know of our love and I don't expect any problem from them."

"I am so happy to hear that," I told her, "If I fail to marry you, I will not live in this world. I risked my life in all these cattle-raids just for your sake."

"I will never forsake you, *Chamanenyu*,⁸ but as you know, when it comes to that matter I am powerless over my kinsfolk and the whole division" she whispered in my embrace.

"I almost lost my life in cattle-raids because of you." At that moment I saw myself again in the valley of death at Moiben. The whole episode had become alive in my mind. I saw many dead bodies sprawling all over and finally that of my beloved friend Kibiwott. I could not control myself shedding tears for my departed friend."

"If your people will reject me, then life is nothing after all. I wish I had died in the wilderness like my beloved friends." I whispered sorrowfully as tears ran down my cheeks. I cleared my nostrils.

"I love you, Sigilai, with all my heart. I would rather die than being married to any other man. You have suffered enough for me and I will be wrong to end up in any other man's house. If I fail to become yours, then I shall surely end my life."

"Please don't leave me alone." I implored her again and again.

⁸My beloved

“I will request my aunt to intercede on my behalf,” she said.

Finally we parted company.

Late in the evening, we were elated by the events surrounding the whole rite. Chesondin emerged from her parents’ house more beautifully attired than ever. She led the rest of the womenfolk to the family altar erected outside. She danced gracefully and proved to be the best dancer. In her song, she praised a warrior who had invaded a foreign land and came back with many cattle. And I felt my chest bulge with pride.

Later that night, when the rest of the initiates joined her, I found that she was the most beautiful girl in the group. Of all the girls, she alone attracted the eyes of everybody as she danced gracefully to the circumcision songs. Most girls would feel shy to express their admiration so publicly. Everybody was admiring the person who had given her the decorations. That was me, Sigilai Arap Tormoi!

“Whoever will marry this girl knows that he has a wife?” Somebody exclaimed for all to hear. “How beautiful she is?” He admired her so much that he felt no shame in showing his admiration loudly.

“I will marry her if you young men are afraid,” An elder of her father’s age said jokingly.⁹

⁹Even though it was very improper for a man to want to marry his age-mate’s daughter, much less to brag about it publicly, during circumcision ceremonies such talk was entirely permissible. This was because circumcision ceremonies were not just rites of initiation; they also afforded men and women a valued opportunity of social and psychological catharsis.-*Ed.*

A short distance away a woman answered, "Our daughter cannot be married to those who have scabies on their bodies."

"But we have no scabies like dogs," another added.

Somebody said, "That is the girl of Sigilai Arap Tormoi. They have been friends for many years.

"Nonsense, she is mine," somebody shouted back. That one was a young man who was very determined to engage her. I had never before seen him.

We participated in the night feasts, and later joined in the dance of *Kipsirgoiit*. If there was any day in the Kalenjin calendar where people enjoyed freedom, it was this day. No one cared for decency in language anymore. It appeared as if some people were competing with one another at uttering obscene words. Names of things that were revered, even private parts, and sexual actions, were mentioned publicly, irrespective of whoever was there. Nobody appeared to pay attention except youngsters who could be heard laughing. It appeared as if everybody was just trying to shame the devil! To crown it all, loud explosive sounds coming from the stomach could be heard from afar amidst peals of shameless laughter. Those who participated in this activity were mainly young men. But then that was part of the ceremony.

Around midnight, dances and songs came to an end. All male relatives were given an opportunity to exhort the candidates. They did it with great zeal.

"If you do not go through the circumcision courageously, we will do what has never been done to any other person alive," said her maternal uncle. He cleared his throat loudly as streams of tears rolled down his cheeks. Then, as if under the spell of a spirit, he jumped up and down, hitting the ceiling and raising a cloud of dust

and soot. He also brought down a shower of cockroaches from the ceiling.

“Our daughter,” he said, “your mother was never a coward and we have never heard of cowards in our family. And you, rubbish, if you even dare to wail, then you are not our sister’s child. I will surely kill you with my own hands if at all you will shame us.” He was full of anger by the mere imagination of Chesondin proving to be a coward. He sat down trembling.

A paternal uncle then stood up. For a long time he said nothing, just trying to speak volumes through his silence. His body shook like a leaf. “If at all you prove to be a coward, then you are not our brother’s daughter. Since time immemorial, we have no place for cowards. If you are going to be the first coward in the history of our clan, then surely you will die, as we cannot be associated with such people.”

Finally, our aged tribal patriarch Telenges, the father of Chesondin, stood up and for a long time no one spoke. There was total silence except for the women’s sobbing. They knew how much he loved her. In his soft voice he said, “My daughter, look at me. Look at me clearly and hear what I am going to say. You have given honour to the clan, my age-mates, and above all myself. I have no more to tell you, my daughter, but to reward you. If you will be brave at this ceremony, I will give you a cow. But my love will come only after sunrise.” He ended his speech without any show of bitterness. He had total faith in his daughter. Telenges was honoured in the whole division as a man of great wisdom. He knew that his daughter was a virgin and had all the courage to face the *rokyet*.¹⁰

¹⁰Literally a potsherd. The actual circumcision process for men and women was a most jealously guarded secret, bound by unbreakable oaths. No man has ever known exactly how women’s circumcision was done, and

Chesondin's father was wearing a *nariet*¹¹ that night as a testimony that her daughter was a virgin. To many, his daughter was a symbol of purity and honour, two things envied by many during such occasions. Quite a good number of the candidates had bestowed such an honour on their parents and kinsmen with the exception of one who had been raped some time ago. That was already a known fact as already the offender had been punished. In those days, girls were circumcised in their mid twenties, not like today when an eleven year old girl is already a woman and some are even mothers at such tender age. Who will teach them the value of virginity?

Anyway, before the candidates departed to the women's House of Ceremony, they were asked if they had any enmity with any person. If so, they were asked to reconcile with their enemies. If it was impossible to do so, then such an enemy was kept away during further ceremonies. Also those with bad eyes were kept away.

Late at night, the candidates were led by godmothers to a house exclusively set apart for circumcision rites. They were duly counselled of what was expected of them and many other things were done and shown to them. All these were never meant for others to hear. Only circumcised women and candidates participated in these sessions. At times, men also could be found in these sessions. Mostly they were those who had undergone certain abnormalities in their marriages especially successive death of their children.

no woman has ever known about men's circumcision either (see Ch. 1, footnote 16). The author, being a man, admits that he does not (and cannot) ever know the actual procedure of women's circumcision. His euphemistic reference to *rokyet* is merely out of his belief, shared by many men, that women's circumcision consisted of the branding of the clitoris by a very hot piece of broken pottery. -Ed

¹¹Headdress

After the candidates had gone, I walked back to my house. My mind was invaded by various thoughts about the morning activities. "Will my girl bravely go through the pains or will she forget our love and cry out?" However, I continued to have faith in her. What troubled me most was the fact that many suitors had also emerged to compete with me. Though I knew of her kinsmen around, their influence alone could not help much. The young suitors were not only rich but had the support of her influential maternal uncles. In such cases, they mattered more than her kinsmen.

Early the next day we gathered together in a chosen area not far from the House of Ceremony. Nobody sneezed as such an act amounted to bad omen. People were conversing in whispers and in small groups as they waited for the actual ceremony with a lot of anxiety. All that we could hear were songs in the women's house.

An hour after sunrise, the candidates led by their senior *motiriot* emerged, followed by the candidates and the junior godmother. Other women had formed a tight ring around them. A fire had been built in the centre.

The participating party moved to a different direction first. Before them were their fathers, uncles and elder brothers. Each candidate was to be anointed with butter. Chesondin approached her people majestically. Her father's traditional stool was given her. She took her time and finally sat on it after her father had promised her a cow. The girls were anointed on their faces, breasts¹² and legs as they were seated. Milk was poured on the heads of the godmothers. Also in their midst were old women while the rest were singing and dancing a distance away. Surprisingly enough, some of the women had our thigh bells on them.

¹²Just a light, symbolic, brushing gesture of anointing the breasts, considering that it was done by the fathers, brothers, and uncles of the initiates. -Ed.

The candidates led by their godmother joined the women who made an opening for them that was closed immediately they entered. We never saw anything as the women were too many, and also the distance between us obscured our view. It was total silence now.

After a short while, the senior godmother led the others in ceremonial ululations three times that signified the end of the act. The junior godmother followed suit. An outburst of different commotion followed from those who were to take the good news towards our direction. But the rest of the women remained behind to provide cover for the initiates. I saw the senior godparent, my aunt running towards me. I marvelled at her speed. I had never thought that this old woman could run like an athlete!

On arrival she embraced me and told me more in action than words that Chesondin had gone through the rite courageously.

I received my share of *sinendet*,¹³ as well as all the items I had loaned to my girl.

During this time of excitement, Chesondin's mother outshone everybody else in athletics as she rushed forward. In her hands were *korosek*¹⁴ to mark her joy at the success of her daughter. Her husband knew what was coming and tried to escape but he could not match the steam of his wife who caught up with him a short distance away. A wrestling match emerged between the two. The aged mother wanted to tell her husband that her daughter was courageous. But she wanted to tell it more in action than in words.

"Father of Chesondin, your daughter is a rock." The mother shouted as she got hold of him. She shook him firmly as if to impress life into him. The old man knew his stand, his firmness.

¹³A sacred climbing plant

¹⁴Sacred plants

Aware of what was going to happen, Telenges also stood like a rock as he said, “Is it true that my daughter has once again honoured me?”

“What did you think of her? Is she not your own daughter from your own blood?” The mother was gathering strength and steam as she got prepared for a real showdown.

The old man was not ready to shame his manhood by being shown the dust. He was ready to defend it before his relatives and age mates at all costs. He never wanted to be seen as a weakling. So he stood on the ground firmly with his aged muscles showing. Unfortunately, for the poor man, that was not the end. The girl’s aunts descended on him demanding to know what he would give his daughter as a reward. The old man promised her a cow—a whole cow called *Cheseger*.

In other quarters, things were equally chaotic. There was a war between a husband and a wife. What could be seen were the *korosek*¹⁵ rising up and down and making loud noises as they landed on skin garments.

“*Pau! Pau! Pau!*” the painful impact was heard from afar as the old couple got into a real fight.

“Who told you that our people are cowards?” The old lady asked again and again after each blow. “And who cheated you that our daughter has been wayward? Didn’t you know that I was fully responsible for her growth and discipline?”

The old lady was so much spirited that her husband proved to be a weakling. She got hold of him and soon the old man was up in the air with his legs dangling. “Mother of Chelel, why all this?” He

¹⁵Sacred plants

gasped imploring his wife to release him, as his strength could not be compared to that of his wife.

People laughed as the couple roughed it out. Possibly they had an old score to settle. Nobody knew. Another old man was pinned right on to the ground by his wife. The man's age-mates rescued him by throwing the wife to the ground. They had a solemn duty towards their friend!

The mood was purely ecstatic. It was ushered in by the good news that the girls had been courageous as well as virgins. Possibly the husbands had been accusing their wives falsely that they were relaxed in instilling discipline into their daughters. Now it was the husbands' turn to pay. The men regretted bullying their wives.

Meanwhile other men were singing and dancing gleefully in praise of their land and their prospective fathers-in-law as some of us jumped high in the air. It appeared like a jumping competition as we were jumping up higher and higher in unison. Also during this time, bad debts were settled. Men, who had long-term quarrels or disputes, settled them now. You should have seen those warriors fighting with whips. They knew the game. At the end of it, their bodies were swollen and full of cracks. After they had thus settled their disputes, they shook hands and became friends.

I myself had a long dispute with Kimagut, the son of Kimaget. He had been trying to woo my beloved and had insulted me by calling me a poor man. That issue had to be settled there and then. He did not know that I came from a family that pays bad debts. He had to be taught a lesson.

As the day approached, I had prepared myself fully for the occasion. I was equipped with a good whip made out of hippo's skin. I had oiled it several times to make it very flexible. Also I

carried a good stick mainly for obstructing a well-aimed whiplash that could damage my body.

Though Kimagut was older than me, and possibly much stronger, I had decided to punish him for his unnecessary intrusion into my affairs. During the last cattle raid, he had even told my girl that I was no longer a normal being. According to him, too many wars had made me insane, and that I could not be trusted anymore. He had thus tarnished my reputation so that he could steal my lover.

"I am just wondering why a good girl like you could love such a useless man?" He had asked her several times, "Don't you see that his parents are so poor? What will they pay as dowry? Dogs? Or cats? He may even have murdered people in the war. Do you really love such a man?" He continued pestering her with so many questions and insults about me.

"But I love him the way he is," she responded respectfully without hurting him.

"I thought you were clever but unfortunately you are a fool." He continued. "Even if he will marry you (which seems impossible to me, anyway), you will surely live in real poverty. And before long you will be as thin as a stick". He showed her a thin stick to illustrate his point. "And nobody will recognize you. And, if I may ask, what has he given you, except a concoction that has darkened your heart and mind? That may be the cause of your attraction to him."

"But he is a man just like you. He has done nothing bad to me, and I have loved him all my life." She replied.

"What do you mean? Do you want to compare me with such a useless fellow?" He asked.

She had told me all this in tears. It was extremely shameful for a family man like him to meddle into my personal affairs in such a disgraceful manner. Just imagine, he was already a polygamous man with two wives, and yet had stooped to the level of calling me names and wanting to steal the only girl I had.

So I could not forgive him. I was ready to teach him a lesson that could stop his ambition of amassing women as if he was the only worthy man to marry. His father's fortune was no reason why he should abuse other people. So I had a hard bone to chew with him. If I had emerged out of the two cattle raids alive, who was Kimagut anyway? I had fought the Maasai, and managed to retrieve our cattle while, like a coward, he never participated in any raid. He had not even managed to kill a hyena.

To make matters worst, the whole village knew the bad things he had been talking about me. So everybody expected me to retaliate and regain my honour.

Today was the day. I waited for my chance.

Finally, I got my chance. I moved close to my target as I danced gracefully with all my muscles bulging. Possibly he had heard of my plans and so had also prepared himself fully for that occasion. He was ready not only to defend his reputation as a rich young man, but also his clan—the division of Kaptumoisi. *How can a boy beat me*, he had reasoned as he gathered his stamina for a showdown with me.

As I approached him, he faced me squarely with his red eyes bulging as if he had gone through a fire. It had been rumoured that he was a coward who could not even face a dog. He wanted to show that he too was a strong and courageous man and not a dog

that could be kicked by a “young boy” like me. So for a moment we just stared one another like two bulls ready to fight.

I did not hesitate dancing around him, whimpering, as I calculated my first move to give him a knockout. Finally I stopped, ready to bring him down to his knees with my first blow. But he was aware of my intentions. As I stepped forward he also did the same. As my left hand pushed forward holding that strong stick, I lashed my whip at him. I got him but the impact did not achieve my purpose. He was mad with rage as his age-mates urged him on to teach the youngster a lesson.

With a fierce cry, he charged at me to crush my body. He was determined to emerge the winner. Nothing could stop him from conquering me. I led him in a circle as I looked for an opening to catch him unguarded. In the same manner we moved—he trying to corner me, while I was waiting for an opportunity to crush him.

In calculated steps, I moved forward trying to close the gap between us. With all his might he swung his whip at me, but I dodged it in a split second that out-balanced his step. His whip flew out of his hand. As he tried to make himself steady, I closed in on him. He was helpless now without his whip. He was now at my mercy.

I remembered the face of Chesondin and felt I was on fire. I lashed at him with all my might as my age-mates roared in laughter. This encouraged me more. I went into a frenzy as I gave him whip after whip until his calfskin tunic was torn and his body was bleeding.

Before people separated us, I had beaten him senseless. There my age-mates hooted with delight as they embraced me. This was actually a fight between two divisions. It was wrong for him to

aspire marriage from our division as if men were no longer found in *Kapchepkendi*. He came from the *Kaptumois* division.

We now were no longer boys but worthy men, as Kimagut learnt the hard way.

5

While all this fighting and chaos was going on, the *tarusiek*,¹⁶ were led to their respective homes for other ceremonies. Engagements were to take place immediately and to be followed by the *ratet*.

Before the gathering broke up into various destinations, Telenges, the tribal patriarch was asked to bless them. We all squatted on the ground as he chanted many blessings and we responded in choral unison.

Leader

Emoni Baibai! Ole baibai!

Komi boisiek baibai! Ole baibai!

Komi chebiosok baibai! Ole baibai!

Komi logok baibai! Ole baibai!

Tucha koam suswek ees! Ole ees!

Chebiosok kobendi sigisio mie! Ole mie!

Tarusiek komi korin ribogis! Ole ribogis!

Koima lalang! Ole lalang!

Chorus

Baibai!

Baibai!

Baibai!

Baibai!

Ees!

Mie!

Ribogis!

Lalang!

¹⁶Circumcised girls

Njor lalang! Ole lalang!
Emoni kim! Ole kim!
King! Ole king!

Lalang!
Kim!
*King!*¹⁷

As people joined various festivities that were to last for several days, we made haste for the next move.

6

The saying “*makiborichin kimaget susut*”¹⁸ is true.

I got a rude surprise when I found that I was competing with eighteen other suitors who wanted to engage Chesondin the

¹⁷**Elder**

This land [is] happy. Say happy!
 And the old men [are] happy. Say happy!
 And the women [are] happy. Say happy!
 And the children [are] happy. Say happy!
 Those cattle when they eat grass flourish
 Say Flourish!
 Those women in labour [are] good
 Say Good!
 The circumcised girls be guarded.
 Say Be guarded!
 [May] Fireplace [be] warm.
 Say Warm!
 [May] Flock room [be] warm.
 Say Warm!
 [May] This land be strong.
 Say Strong!
 Amen. Say Amen!

Chorus

Happy!
 Happy!
 Happy!
 Happy!
 Flourish!
 Good!
 Be guarded!
 Warm!
 Warm!
 Strong!
 Amen!

¹⁸Don't show a hyena how well you can bite, for his jaws are more powerful.

tarusiot.¹⁹ I did not know that by making her presentable during the just ended celebrations, I had created trouble for myself.

I was extremely surprised to see all these suitors emerging from nowhere and converging at Chesondin's home. I had seen them during the celebrations, but had thought they had just come to enjoy the dances and songs and perhaps later to join in the sumptuous feasts. But alas, there they were in eighteen groups. Their elders were holding branches of *nokiruet*.²⁰ All were waiting at the family's rear door with all humility and anxiety. Nobody spoke, or even whispered except for an occasional clearing of their throats. I was wondering where they all had mushroomed from. Just imagine nineteen men after one girl. I knew that a good number of them had never seen her but might have heard of her respectability from distant relatives. Or perhaps some of them had just come to watch the ceremony, and had stumbled upon the occasion accidentally and opted to try their luck.

I later came to remember, as she had told me, that some were prosperous young men who were flanked by her aunts and uncles. Among the suitors were the already married ones whose interests were enlarging their families.

To crown it all, there was this old man who was twice my age and had a large family.

All the men, including us suitors, were singing and dancing *cheptilet*, as if nothing was taking place.

Anyway, our emissaries were squatting on the ground with sacred plants in their hands as if they were seeking a truce after a

¹⁹A circumcised woman

²⁰A sacred plant

civil war. Their major concern was to build a relationship with the host through marriage.

The host was never bothered and took his time in appearing before us. Nobody provided the suitors or their agents with seats or refreshments, let alone a word of welcome or greetings. But they were in no mood of eating anyway.

This scene was somehow similar to dividing cattle after a cattle-raid—too many claimants and too few cattle. In fact, both a cattle-raid and an engagement ceremony share the same name *keseet*. So an engagement ceremony is quite like a cattle raid.

Though my emissaries knew most people from other groups present there, now there was a temporary enmity caused by the competition. Chesondin was the prize and would go to the most favoured bidder.

After a long time, an elder emerged from the house before them. He behaved as if the visitors were a bother to him. He walked majestically before them in a leisurely manner, viewing the squatting men with little interest. Our emissaries knew of such maneuvers and had their eyes fixed at him, especially at his face and hands. All of a sudden, he gestured to one of the parties, using a finger. He did not even bother to look in the direction of the man he was pointing. It was our job to watch him carefully. If we failed to watch him, then he would ignore us anyway. The party that had been pointed by the elder, entered the house. After what looked like eternity, the party came out, but no longer holding the *korosek*.²¹ They had been shown where to place the plant ceremoniously. They squatted again knowing that the war had only begun.

²¹Sacred plants

Other groups followed one after another. Finally, my party was honoured.

Our party entered the house led by my uncle. Inside the house there was silence as if the host had gotten tired after all those grueling oral examinations.

Chesondin's paternal uncle finally inquired:

"What are you after here?"

"We are after a lost cow," my paternal uncle answered.

"Did you follow its footprints to this compound?"

"Yes"

"And who are you?"

"We are of the Kipkenda clan, people of bees."

"We are of the Kipois clan, and our totem is jackal," offered the host. It was necessary to mention clans because people of the same clan and totem could not intermarry, as they were already relatives.

After the elders had had a brief consultation in whispers, my party was asked to proceed outside leaving the sacred plants. They joined the rest squatting outside. For a long time, our hosts conferred inside the house as they examined all the suitors' families. That included whether cases of abnormalities like witchcraft, homicide, curses or cruelty had ever been heard among the prospecting families. There was even an investigation of the aunts and uncles of the suitors. All these examinations spanned several past generations. The elders also considered whether there had been past

intermarriages between their clan and that of the suitors', and whether such marriages had succeeded or failed.

It was also considered whether one of the hosts had benefited from one of the prospectors' families. In such a case the beneficiary would say (for example), "This suitor's family once provided us with a bull, which successfully sired many heifers." Such information would be an additional asset for the suitor.

The elders made their decision by rejecting the unwanted suitors. Families with abnormalities were sidelined, as also those who were not quite well known to host's the family.

At long last, the elder re-emerged. Like before, he signaled to the leaders of four families, mine inclusive, as I could see from afar. They were told to collect their *korosek* from inside. This indicated that the number of competitors had been reduced to four now. The rest, though knowing that it was not their day, would not leave immediately. They thought perhaps none of the four might win and the whole ritual might be repeated. That had happened before. When such a thing happened the host could give an excuse that one of the maternal uncles was absent, thus calling off the negotiations till the next day. In that case the field was opened to all competitors plus new ones.

Most of those selected families were those held in favour by the host's family, the aunts, the uncles and the *pororiet*.²² The *pororiet* played a significant role. The first daughter in a family and the only daughter was the property of her father's division and could not be married off outside that circle.

The first party was invited in as earlier on.

²²A tribal division comprising several clans living in one place

The first party entered and emerged without the sacred plants.

Our party was next and more examination followed.

“Do we have a nephew from our daughter?”

“Yes. Here he is.” My uncle said.

A middle-aged man was identified to the hosts.

The man was a living testimony to the fact that there had been previous successful intermarriages between the two clans.

“To how many past age-sets?”

“To several age-sets,” My uncle answered.

The hosts then held further whispers among themselves. They were grouped together in the house. Heads could be seen nodding to the greatest excitement from my party.

I was not present at this ceremony, as suitors were not allowed to participate in engagement negotiations. My uncle told me all this later.

Chesondin, the *tarusiot*, played no role in these negotiations either. No one consulted her for her personal opinion on the matter. All the time, she remained hidden in the other room. She was the property of the clan and had no voice of her own. Her fate rested entirely on her kinsfolk. In most cases, her close association with any man did not matter as she could be offered in marriage to any man favoured by her family, her father’s division or the clan. It was very common for a girl to get married to somebody she had never known in her life. Love between the sweethearts was not at all a subject for discussion.

After a short while the inquisitor continued, “Open your quiver.” Obviously, by this he did not mean to ask that we should show him our arrows. The hosts actually wanted to see the *fruits* of our arrows, that is, the cattle.

My uncle began saying, “Here, I give you ...” mentioning our herds one after another. Every animal given to the in-laws had a special significance. The first gift must be a calving cow. It was meant for *kanyiyiet*.²³ In one way or another, it represented fertility. The girl in question was supposed to be fertile. She was supposed to be carrying a “child” though she was a virgin. On the wedding day, she would carry a calabash full of milk, on her back to represent a baby. So the cow meant for dowry was supposed to have a calf and must be in milk. A milk-giving symbolized a breastfeeding woman. So there was a significant connection between the dowry cow and the girl.

A *Kimwait*²⁴ followed that and the third was a *Chemwait*.²⁵ Both these animals were significant mainly for their fat or oil to be used in cementing the relationship between the two families or clans. An ox followed which was meant as payment for the feeding of the bride during her seclusion period. Also to be included were four sheep representing flocks. Among the cows, at least one must come from the suitor’s own labour, while the rest could be from his father or his clan.

All the animals to the in-laws were supposed to be in their best condition. The following animals could not be offered to the in-laws as dowry: a hornless cow, a sick cow, a lame cow or a cow with a history of dying calves. But why animals with horns? Horns represented a woman’s two breasts. It was erroneous to marry off a flat-breasted, woman and a curse to marry a one-breasted woman.

²³Dowry

²⁴Ox

²⁵Heifer

Therefore, all animals offered must give a complete picture of a herd.

The Nandi people have never demanded beyond what I have said. Money had no place in the prestigious institution of marriage among our people. We have never sold our daughters like animals in a marketplace and neither do we haggle over the bride price for them. Recently, there was a case of another tribe seeking one of our daughter's hand in marriage. After other formalities, they were asked to open their quiver. First, they got confused for they had expected us to name a direct price for our daughter. Anyway, they produced money equivalent to twenty live cows. Did we feel blessed? No. Humbly, we told them what we wanted, and they were quite confused and surprised. In their society the price of a bride is determined by how much her parents and family have invested in rearing her up.

If some of our favoured sons-in-law to-be were not able to raise the needed animals, engagement proceedings would not be cancelled, or postponed. That has never been the case. There was always room for *kiseete*.²⁶ At times, the right suitor could not even produce a single animal, but still he had a chance. He could surrender a bow to his in-laws with a promise that before long he would raise what was needed. And in those days, a man did keep his word.

The favoured suitor could try his best to raise dowry through all means including participating in cattle raids. Even if he had only one cow in his household to offer, it was still acceptable.

As the bride's parents came to claim their animal, he would say, "Remember me also later." The in-laws would keep that request in their hearts knowing the desperate situation of their son in-law. So when the cow would be blessed with calves, they would

²⁶Meaning that the process of raising dowry would continue

remember what their son-in-law had said. In the long run they would invite him and his wife for a visit. And as they left later for their home, the son-in-law would be shown a heifer and be told, "This was your mouth."²⁷

As the days passed, the heifer would also prosper. The young man would also remember his dowry payment that was incomplete. He would pay the balance of the dowry through the heifer's offspring. And in that trust, a well-consolidated relationship would prosper as none remained with any bitterness. So, in our tribe there was a long-term process of paying dowry.

At times, the unfortunate young man could also be assisted by his kinsmen with the aim of "covering his nakedness" before his in-laws. Marriage was a communal matter as it was expected to increase the whole clan.

Again, junior warriors could not marry until all the senior ones were married. In most cases before a new age-set was inaugurated, many girls were gathered for circumcision, even those not yet mature,²⁸ to ensure that all the senior warriors had brides. That was very considerate towards both the junior and the senior warriors.

Anyway, after my family had made the necessary offerings, a new phase began. The two parties shook hands for the first time. A deal had been made as laughter could be heard to the bewilderment of those who were still crouching outside. Jokes were shared. A new friendship and relation had been found. That was not the end. Some well-prepared butter was provided by the *tarusiot*, now the

²⁷Referring to his word, or his request "to be remembered."

²⁸Although it was not common for girls to be circumcised below puberty, this rule was relaxed in the exceptional circumstance where, owing to the inauguration of a new age-set, there would be a high demand for and the resultant scarcity of girls to be married. -Ed.

would-be bride. Using a calabash's washing stick she dished the butter to her parents who smeared the faces, arms and legs of her parents-in-law to-be. The latter also reciprocated in like manner. Thus the name *bamwai*²⁹ came into being. Milk was shared for the first time among all those who participated. And in most cases the same calabash of milk moved from mouth to mouth.

Our party emerged out of the house for further preparations, and this time they were carrying the *korosek*³⁰ in their hands. That signified that our party had emerged as the winners.

Those outside took the news sadly as they left humbly to their own destinations. The other two parties outside with *Korosek* were told humbly *yakwai let*³¹ that they would be remembered when other daughters came of age, not necessarily in that particular family, but from the clan as a whole. That was a comforting promise because it gave the unsuccessful suitors an opportunity in the future. Having blessed their *Korosek* with saliva they rested them at the family altar outside. The plants were later taken into the house as the property of that family. It meant that the presence of all the competitors had been recognized as their *Korosek* could show. They were not thrown away but left for the family's flocks to scatter them around the *njor*³² and later on plastered with their droppings and urine on to the floor.

²⁹People of oil

³⁰Sacred plants

³¹You will be blessed later.

³²Flock room

I was informed of the good news by my uncle. He further told me to get ready for the *ratet*.³³ It was to take place immediately. Such hurry had its own reasons.

One of the eighteen other prospecting suitors could still elope with her by force, through intimidation, or influence by the dissatisfied uncles and aunts. Such things had happened before.

Soon, we were prepared for that ceremony. *A boiyob tum*³⁴ was sought. Also there were our matrimonial escorts, a married couple. With my best man, we entered the house where the bride and the best maid joined us. Then in a single file we all went round the room.

The procession had its own order. The best man led, I followed, then the bride, and finally the best maid. We went round eight times and in the process we were sprayed generously with beer. After that our foreheads—the bride's and mine—were brought together and another eight rounds and more spraying was done. In the process, the aged elder had so many things to say. He prayed to Asis and our departed ancestors for our protection. He poured generous blessings on us as the gathering responded in unison.

This was followed by the actual *ratet* ceremony. Our matrimonial escorts had already prepared wreaths of *sekutiet* grass, one for me and another for the bride. The two items were generously

³³Also known as the “first marriage ceremony,” *ratet* was actually a ritual of betrothal preceding the formal marriage. It is noteworthy that *ratet*-brides were newly circumcised girls who would immediately be proceeding for their healing and home-craft instruction period in seclusion. Immediately after that period was over, the brides would be married off in a final and formal nuptial ceremony. —Ed.

³⁴Spiritual leader

blessed by the *boiyob tum*. Then my godfather tied one wreath to my right wrist while the godmother tied another to the bride's neck rings. From then on, she was my betrothed wife and none could claim her.³⁵

We later went home, after a generous feast, carrying our *Korosek*.³⁶ On my wrist I still had the *sekutiet* as a testimony to our blessings. Two days later, my mother and I went back to collect the bride's *sekutiet*. Our godparents untied them, and gave them to my mother who kept them in a horn after oiling them thoroughly.

8

Unfortunately, the parents of other marriageable girls were not as lucky as those of Chesondin's as no suitors had visited them. Cheptum's father, Arap Soi, was the most disturbed of all.

He watched in dismay the activities taking place in other families while his compound was empty and yet his daughter Cheptum was there to be engaged. Like the rest, he too was anticipating many suitors. He was not amused at all.

How could they bypass my homestead, he kept asking himself. He was expecting the most respectable and handsome men to engage his daughter. And he had in mind quite a good number of them. But not even the ugly and the poor came to his house. How could they disgrace him?

³⁵These wreaths were not actually worn around wrist or neck, as might be imagined, but just tied so that they kept hanging outside the right wrist (of the bridegroom) and the neck (of the bride). —*Ed.*

³⁶Sacred plants

How come the homestead of Telenges, the father of Chesondin was crowded by suitors? The old man had never realized that young men and the entire community detested his family.

Arap Soi was blessed with many cows, sheep and goats but he was a merciless man and despised the unfortunate ones. He was arrogant and even his family adopted that attitude. There was an incident that took place during a great famine that finished off many people. A long draught had caused the famine. Many people neither planted nor harvested that year, and even three years that followed. Many lost their valued wealth, animals and had nothing to survive on. Arap Soi had many granaries of millet. There was milk in many gourds that even dogs in his compound enjoyed. There was plenty of food.

His neighbour was in great distress as his wife was pregnant and yet he had no food, not even a grain of millet to feed her. One morning he visited his neighbour, Arap Soi, for assistance. He talked at length of his pathetic situation while Arap Soi watched him in silence.

Finally the suppliant said, "My friend, you know that my wife is expecting a baby soon and I have nothing to offer her as food. I have come for some food-assistance. I promise to refund it later."

Arap Soi looked at him for a long time with his lips twisted in contempt. Finally, he said, "I have food only enough for my family and my dogs. I cannot feed another man's family."

"Please, assist us," the neighbour continued pleading desperately.

"I have said, I have no spare food for you. Did you not hear me? And how do you expect to refund it when you are so poor and

useless? Why do you people produce so many children without knowing how to bring them up?"

As the dejected neighbour rose to leave, Arap Soi added, "Don't bring your family affairs to my home again. I don't raise food for lazy people."

So with great sorrow, his neighbour left knowing that his wife's life was hanging by a thin rope. He had nowhere to turn to again as his other neighbours were all poor like him.

As he approached his homestead, he saw an unexpected activity going on. Women were running up and down as his thin and weak wife was already in labour. In desperation, he knew that the fateful hour had come. He heard the women wail as their patient had fainted after giving birth to an equally bony child. There was nothing in the house, which could assist her to regain strength and the blood she had lost in childbirth.

Some women appealed loudly for urgent aid for the dying mother. Other women ran here and there trying to find whatever they could lay their hands on. Within no time, flour mixed with cold water was forced down the throat of the fainted woman. Miraculously, she survived.

Nobody offered any assistance from the home of Arap Soi even though they heard the women's call of distress. So people remembered that incident with bitterness.

Unfortunately, Cheptum, the daughter of Arap Soi, had taken after her father's attitude. She adored wealth and despised poverty. She basked in the glory of her father who was the richest man around. On many occasions she had openly said that she hated poverty. She could not see herself intermingling with poor people.

In fact she would neither eat nor drink in any home, which was in her neighbourhood. She saw herself as a real star. She was proud and haughty.

Even her unfortunate admirer, Kibiwot, despite the fact that he was courageous and handsome, could not impress her much.

She had declared, "I don't want to be married to a poor man like Kibiwot. He means nothing in my life. My people are rich and I have nothing to do with poverty. All other people around are poor and I do not want them." She lived in her own dream-world of wealth and luxury.

"And who will eventually marry you?" Her friends would ask her.

"I do not care. I know somebody rich from far will come to engage me," she said. She counted on her father's recognition.

"But Kibiwot is a good and handsome man," they would remind her.

"But I have said that without property he is useless. If he is good he must own cows like my father. I will not live on anything but milk and meat. I have never been a vegetarian and will never be." She said.

She had made her unfortunate demand forcefully to Kibiwot. She had told him that she would not look at him if he came to her as a poor man.

And that drove my poor friend, Kibiwot to death, as he was slain at Moiben after the last Kapkwambisi cattle raid. He died in the prime of his youth while trying to raise cattle to impress his girl.

Later, as engagement celebrations went on in other homes, the home of Arap Soi was silent as a graveyard. No one had shown interest in his lovely daughter.

People were asking, “Who would marry such a woman?” She was beautiful all right, but lacked good manners. All beautiful women are not equally lucky when it comes to marriage. Our wise men have said, “*Ma kergei ainosiek tugul.*”³⁷

Cheptum ended up remaining unmarried for the rest of her life. Of course, she bore several children, but to no husband in particular.

As Arap Soi had been extremely arrogant to the elders, they too had vowed and counselled their children never to marry into that family. They would say, “My blood should never go to the family of Arap Soi, and if such a marriage will take place, it will be cursed.”

9

After the *ratet* ceremony, Chesondin and the rest of the *tarusiek* began their circumcision seclusion period. They went through various rituals before their *ngetunotet*.³⁸ These rituals are specifically for the circumcised women in which men are not included.

During that period they were prepared to meet the challenges of womanhood, and what it meant to be an adult. They were taught how to preserve tribal wisdom and how to interpret and apply them to day-to-day activities. Through many activities they learnt how to make their house presentable. The house in question was only for

³⁷Not all rivers are equally wide

³⁸The “coming out” ceremony

those women who had undergone the rites. Within their seclusion house, there were two significant places. They were *sum* and *kapteriot*. *Sum* was a temporary partition found in the main house where the *tarusiek* could sleep. *Kapteriot* was an outside enclosure attached to the house. Its name is derived from the verb *ke-ter*.³⁹ It meant that the area was well protected and there the *tarusiek* could loiter around and practical teachings were given to them here. Their godmothers, who were mature people, lived with them permanently throughout the course of their seclusion period.

In *kapteriot*, the candidates had miniature houses resembling an authentic Nandi homestead. The “huts” had all the requirements of a Nandi home. For example, each hut had a *koima*⁴⁰ and an *njor*.⁴¹ Bed positions were clearly identified for husband, wife and the children. It had also various miniature utensils for the husband and the rest and different place where they were kept. The husband’s position and his needs were separate from the rest. The small houses were well taken care of with a lot of decorations. The girls would compete with their mates in decorating their “houses”. The huts, though small, were swept several times every day. A husband’s bed place was designated and kept clean at all times.

Next to the miniature main house, was a “cattle kraal”. The *tarusiek* were supposed to be a practical farmers. Inside the main kraal were three partitions.

One small kraal was for cattle and others for flocks and calves. The kraals were very clean. In them were sodom apples representing the herds. The big apples for cattle, medium for calves and small ones for goats and sheep. In mock exercises they could milk them, drive them to grazing areas and even lead them to water points.

³⁹To protect

⁴⁰Fireplace

⁴¹Flock room

The sodom apples were replaced on daily basis so as to make them look more appealing.

The *Sum* room was kept clean at all times and inspections were carried out daily. Any error was punished with beatings. Even noise making or any disobeying the godmother's command was punishable. Theirs was to create a good homely attitude full of love and understanding. Almost everything taught had the practical element in it. There were rules also regulating the entire period of seclusion.

The girls were taught to be industrious and self-supportive. They were shown how to make *terenik*,⁴² *sotonik*,⁴³ *kerebonik*,⁴⁴ *kitongok*,⁴⁵ and *ngoroik*⁴⁶ of all types for men, women and children. They were also shown how to keep themselves and the house clean. They were shown how to clean gourds and how to crush burning charcoal from designated trees into them to prepare them for use.

They were taught how to observe humility and obedience to their husbands, relatives and friends. They were warned against being disrespectful, and against ill manners like unnecessary bickering and complaints.

They were taught the value of generosity. The *tarusiek* were expected to share what they had with others. They shared the same food in the traditional dish and even milk using one calabash or a *lalet*.⁴⁷ So everything was shared equally, including responsibilities. They were expected to follow these rules all their lives. They were

⁴²Pots

⁴³Gourds

⁴⁴Traditional dishes

⁴⁵Baskets

⁴⁶Garments

⁴⁷A drinking horn

taught in proverbs and tales. A story ran that a long time ago there was a woman who was a notorious, poor host. One day a visitor came. He was her husband's age-mate. Her husband was not at home. As a rule, she should have fed the visitor immediately, but she did not. Even a mug of water the visitor could not taste. The family had enough food and milk. But she prepared for him to sleep on an empty stomach. Late at night her husband arrived. On learning of a visitor he inquired whether he had been fed. The woman lied that she had fed him. However, the guest heard everything but said nothing. Early the next day the husband reminded his wife to feed their guest. He left for other responsibilities intending to come back soon. The man also heard. On waking up, the woman told him plainly that there was famine in the home and she could not provide any food.

The man requested for water to drink. He rinsed his mouth with it and spat it into the fire-place. That was a curse and she paid for it heavily. She suffered several miscarriages causing her to a lot of suffering. After many visits to the medicine man, she confessed to her mistake. A cleansing ceremony was done after a remorseful visit to the aggrieved man. He was presented with a cow for forgiveness. The woman was later permanently sent back to her parents. So the *tarusiek* were advised to always keep a spare gourd of milk for visitors and other emergencies.

They were also told to avoid gossiping. Only idle women were victims of such weaknesses and in most cases were beaten by their husbands. So idleness was abhorred.

They were also warned against intruding into other people's affairs unnecessarily unless invited to do so. If people confided in them with their personal problems, it was to be a secret and not for public consumption.

So, they were taught to be peacemakers and never to be used as tools of a family's disintegration.

They were told to be ready for both the bad and the good times. They were informed that every household had its own share of strengths and weakness, and they were to know how to balance them. They were taught to be fair and neutral in cases of disputes.

Above all, they were told to be hard working in terms of food production. It was the responsibility of the women to manage their own family affairs while their husbands had the responsibility to provide security for their homes. A story is told that after a successful cattle-raid a warrior told his comrades, "We have won the battle but we have other enemies at home we are yet to conquer." The warrior had referred to the women at home. Our brides were expected to be responsible people managing their families' economic affairs. They were told that lazy women were hosts of all evils including gossips.

They were counselled to guard their homes and especially their marriages from outside interventions by loving and respecting their husbands. Failure to do so meant opening avenues for competitions with other women.

The seclusion period lasted six months, which included various rituals.

The *Kapkiyai* ceremony took place immediately before *ngetunotet*.⁴⁸ In the *Kapkiyai* ceremony, the candidates were immersed in water as a sign of purification from all impurities during the course of their seclusion. It was like a baptism. It meant the old had gone including all childhood activities paving way to a mature status.

⁴⁸The "coming out" ceremony

At long last the sixth month passed and the then *chepkeleloik*⁴⁹ entered their final phase of *ngetunotet*. On the eve of this occasion, the brides were confirmed fully in the tribal norms, practices and beliefs. All the rites pertaining to women circumcision were sacred, and their violation would bring a curse. Men have never known the women's circumcision rituals and neither have women known men's.

The "Coming out ceremony" finally came to an end.

Early the next day a *kapkorosut*⁵⁰ altar was built on a spacious ground. It resembled a gate of about five feet high and was decorated with sacred plants all over. To the east of it was a mixture of cow-dung, ochre and milk. The archway's gate had been closed with sacred plants.

At the height of the ceremony, a boy—either a brother or a cousin to a bride—was asked to open the gate for the bride. The bride, led by her godparents, entered. An aged elder sprayed them with milk. Also immediately were the relatives of each bride.

There a final ceremony took place. With their feet they smeared the bride's feet with the sacred mixture and the bride did likewise to them. Also butter or oil was provided and men relatives smeared the bride and her friends on the faces.

It was followed by special dances and songs signifying the end of the coming out ceremony. People were excited. There were no unbecoming incidents as there would be none on the circumcision day. Respect and honour played a very big role. Furthermore, any ugly incidence was bad omen to the young brides.

⁴⁹Brides

⁵⁰An archway

After this ceremony, the gathering was blessed by the tribal patriarch followed by prayers to Asis and the ancestors. People prayed to Asis to provide the brides with fertility, good moral character, and the swiftness of hands in the housework. It was a beautiful occasion. Men, women and children responded in unity to the blessings that were offered by the aged elders. The brides and their *moterenik*⁵¹ were kneeling side by side as prayers and blessings were offered.

Finally, the celebrations at the altar ended, and the brides were led to their respective homes. On arrival, a *kimarigit* dance was performed. This was specifically for the father's age-mates and the bride. This dance was only performed to a bride who had honoured her father with virginity. The song accompanying it was sung in the family's cattle kraal. In a graceful procession they danced led by the father followed by his daughter. The bride held on to her father's shoulders firmly during this dance. At the end of this, an aged elder sprayed the participants with milk as they filed out. This blessing had its own meaning. The fresh milk was poured into a gourd and firmly closed with *seretyot*.⁵² As the dancers were leaving the kraal, milk was sprayed upon them. The grass represented fertility in the land while the milk showed the abundance in the land. So the girl was led into the life of fertility and plenty by her father and his age-mates. The gate of life had been formally opened for her.

What was to follow was a great feast. There was a lot of food, drinks, songs and dances. The visitors marvelled at the reception laid before them. Later, they complimented to their hosts by saying, "We have never seen any feast like this."

During that period, many activities were taking place at our home. We were preparing for the marriage ceremony. A lot of food and drinks had been preprepared for the great occasion. And many

⁵¹Godmothers

⁵²Kikuyu grass

people were already converging at our homestead. Many had come from afar.

11

At dusk of the appointed day, we were ready to be united officially in marriage. Our *motirenik*⁵³ were with me right from that morning. They were two couples who as I have said, were blameless and represented a good picture of a family. The female spouses left in the afternoon for the bride's home and with them were a girl and a lad. Their mission was to escort the bride to her matrimonial home. The youngster's presence and responsibilities were of great importance for the ceremony.

The bride, even though a virgin, departed from her parental home to her matrimonial home symbolically as a "mother." For this purpose she would carry a calabash of milk on her back representing a newborn baby. The young girl, from the bridegroom's home, represented a maid who had come to escort that "mother and the baby." To complete the picture, the "maid" had carried the child's food (mostly porridge) in a small calabash! Nandi men refer to their wives as their "children." It meant that without her there would be no children for the husband. Thus my bride was well prepared for motherhood.

I was to be referred to as her "first born child" while she was my "children." The lad signified the responsibility of a herdsman. The young bride was leading cattle represented by gourds and washing sticks. Her immediate role was to manage her husband's herds so she had to have a herds-boy with her. Also the youngsters represented her children. A home was not complete without a child.

⁵³Godparents

As she left her mother's house, she carried very precious items. There was a calabash full of milk, which was swaddled onto her back. The calabash represented a baby. Also she carried *soosik*⁵⁴ tied together with *itooik*.⁵⁵ They were to be used in sweetening milk in a calabash. This is how it was done. The wood was burnt and later crushed into the calabash using the *sosiot*⁵⁶ from a palm tree. She also carried a *kerebet*⁵⁷ full of flour. With all these items she was ready to assume her responsibilities as a wife.

On top of her garments, she wore a cow-collar as a belt. She also wore a thigh belt with bells whose jingling sounds would announce her arrival from afar.⁵⁸

Though the journey was not far, they had an early start. The journey was to be effected with great caution. Abnormalities on the way meant bad omens. For example, if she stumbled or hit her feet against any obstacle, it was a bad omen. Also she was not to look back for that meant failure in her marriage.

Anyway, as I was saying we heard the jingling sound of a cow belt approaching from afar signifying the arrival of the bride and her entourage. Darkness had already ascended on the land. We got prepared at a family altar already erected to the east of the main

⁵⁴Washing sticks

⁵⁵Dried wood from special trees

⁵⁶A washing stick

⁵⁷A traditional dish

⁵⁸Compare the bride's thigh bells with a similar ornament worn by the warriors. See, for instance, Chapter 3, footnote 6 and Chapter 4, footnote 41. Compare also the marriage ceremony and initiation ceremony, how during her initiation the lady wore a war-dress loaned to her by her lover (Chapter 5, footnote 3). Such comparison might suggest that according to the ancient Nandi understanding, a bride was recognized as a warrior's wife. –Ed.

house. With me were the two men whose spouses were in the bridal delegation. Also with us was *boiyob tum*.

As they arrived, we arranged ourselves in the following manner. First was the senior godfather, to be followed by the junior one. Then I followed and after me was the bride. Godmothers followed according to seniority.

We went round the altar eight times and in the process we were sprayed with milk and beer by the aged elder. A lot of prayers and blessings were generously offered for our health, prosperity and procreation.

After the outside ceremony, we entered the house in where many rituals took place. At the end of it all we were made to kneel down. Our heads and hands were brought together, and again sprayed with beer and milk. It was an important part of the ceremony, as prayers and blessings flowed generously. Elders prayed to God to give us children and bless the works of our hands. We were all later seated on a skin from a blameless cow and in the same order. With our legs and hands stretched, we received more blessings.

Finally, to complete the picture of married life the bride had to cook, using the flour she had brought, to feed her husband, and she had to feed the “guests” with the milk she brought. During the process her godparents assisted her as part of the ceremony.

After this, we entered the counselling stage. Our elders taught us all matters concerning married life. In Kalenjin culture, marriage was the most honoured institution and could not be taken lightly. We were cautioned against disgracing the sacred institution of marriage. To our people divorce was a very sad thing. There were no trial marriages as there are these days. Ours was “as long as you live.” A woman was married for all her life, even if she ended up as a

widow or childless. She remained part and parcel of her husband's immediate family and the clan as a whole.

Though she was the property of the whole clan, she had only one husband. No one has heard of a custom where a woman can marry several husbands.

We were made to understand that marriage was a sacred institution that was to be guarded throughout our lives. Whoever tried to break our marriage had a curse in the land. Infidelity or any immoral behaviour was viewed as an offence to a marriage. Of course, a man could marry another wife, but with the full approval of his legal wife. Infidelity by a wife led to a tribal curse.

The bride was counselled to respect her husband, his immediate relatives, and all people irrespective of sex, age and, especially, his age-mates. I was to be seen healthy, strong and smart at all times. I was to be seen as a respectable person before the community. A weak and thin husband indicated that his wife was not taking good enough care of him.

In such cases, elderly women would summon and warn such a woman, at times on pain of beatings. She would be further told that a husband was a husband irrespective of what status he had in the community. He was never to be questioned or argued with. In case she identified any weakness in her husband, she was to use her own resources and wisdom to correct those weaknesses without showing any arrogance.

Many things that she had been told during her seclusion periods were repeated now.

Also I received my share of counselling. I was to be a responsible husband in terms of producing food that my wife was to manage. I was supposed to be the head of the family with all the

qualities of a good husband. I was to discharge my duties at all times. I was further told that it was erroneous for a husband to be seen idling without caring for his family. I was warned against childish behaviour. For example, now that I was a married man, I should not mix too much with unmarried people.

I was further counselled against getting drunk with beer. It was bad for a married man to be seen drunk. I still had the responsibility of providing security in the land. It meant that I was to have a good image of a husband at all times.

Above all I was to love my wife. I was to provide all her needs that could enable her to discharge her duties effectively. I was to give her sympathy and understanding.

Finally, in the small hours of the morning, we were allowed to sleep after so many rituals.

At sunrise, the ceremonies continued as we moved from the family-altar to the house.

Later in the day, my in-laws arrived. They had not participated the previous night's rituals. We were so much exhausted by all the events that we badly needed a rest.

On the arrival of my in-laws, we all went to the cattle kraal where the in-laws had to ascertain their herds. Only three of us entered into my father's kraal. They were my wife, her brother, and myself. My father was already in the kraal. Being guided by my father, I showed them the animals that my uncle had offered them on the engagement day. Using a long stick from a sacred tree, I touched the first cow. My wife did the same and to be followed by my brother-in-law. The same was done to the rest of the animals. My new relatives could now take their animals whenever they wanted them.

Was this the end of the ceremonies? No.

We were led to the altar where in kneeling positions we were shaved. One of the godmothers shaved the bride while one of the godfathers shaved me. Our hair was mixed together and later with the *sekutiet* grass—used during *ratet*⁵⁹—were further mixed with cow-dung, and then plastered on the foot of the family altar. It meant that we were now one. Having done so, we went round the altar another eight rounds and we were further sprayed with the same beer and milk that had been previously used during the *ratet*. More oral blessings and prayers followed.

Finally, by the evening, we seemed to be through with the exercise that had lasted a full day and a whole night. It was a real wedding!

The above rituals were only meant for the first marriage which was the only legal marriage recognized in our community. Although a man was allowed to bring in subsequent wives, only the first wife was recognized as legally married to the man, while the rest were only meant to add to the family. The first wife enjoyed a special status that could never be enjoyed by her co-wives. For example, it was the first wife who helped her husband to remove his *korek kutwo*.⁶⁰ The rest of the women could not be accorded such an honour. The first wife was respected as *chep-nyo-gaa*.⁶¹

The first wife was rewarded also with a cow called *chepsegutyet*. The ceremony of the tying of hands with the sacred plant *sekutiet* during the first marriage (*ratet*) was only done for the first wife. Therefore, she was rewarded with a cow. Also being the first woman to lead the man to his matrimonial bed, she was

⁵⁹The first marriage or the betrothal ceremony. See above footnote 33.

⁶⁰Headdress

⁶¹The one who arrived first

also rewarded with a cow called *tetab itook*.⁶² The rest of her co-wives were not rewarded in that manner.

In the case of a polygamous marriage, the first wife played a big role as the only legally married woman in that family. She was called “mother” by her co-wives and was highly respected. As I said before, any further marriage in her family had to come with her approval. She had a right to refuse, and most important, she had a right to choose her own co-wife. And she participated fully in all preparations including engagements. In that case she held an auspicious position in her husband’s family.

12

By the end of the ceremonies, we were already covered with beer and milk. Our faces were dripping with beer and milk in real testimony that we were a newly married couple. Much praise went to our *boiyob tum*. I knew one thing. The best part of the sprays on our faces were his saliva. But then we needed it for our survival and sustainability.

Then the *boiyob tum* prayed for us earnestly.

Asis! Asis! Konech sapon
Asis! Asis! Kusyi kong langochu
Asis! Iberur karon ak koskoleny
Asis! Igochi lagok
Asis! Indochi lakwani kosigis komie
Asis! Igochi kotebi tuwai komei

⁶²The bed cow

Asis! Igochi tun kogeer mochogoronikwak
*Asis! Kasech kakisan*⁶³

The day that followed was set for other ceremonial events. To begin with, our godparents arrived. We were led to our matrimonial house and many things of the marriage ceremony were repeated there. The senior godfather led carrying a dry block of wood and an equally dried shaft. The women and my married age-mates carried other household provisions.

On arrival the bride was shown how to make a fireplace. After that we were led in making fire through the *biyonet*.⁶⁴ Facing one another we knelt down. The pieces of wood were placed before us.

With the shaft we drilled a hole into the block of wood. We had to do this by spinning the shaft between our palms. We were supposed to do this non-stop without pausing for breathing. With full force we spun the shaft between our palms very fast. Finally, a hole was formed in the block to be followed instantly by smoke and later a spark of fire, which was transferred to the fireplace. Thus a sign of life was seen in the house.

The whole process of making fire symbolized procreation. And that was the reason why both of us participated in that process of

⁶³God! God! Give us health.

God! God Look upon these children.

God! Bless [them] in the morning and [in the] evening.

God! Give them children.

God! Lead this maiden to give birth successfully.

God! Give them god life.

God lead them till they see their grandchildren.

God! Hear us, we pray.

⁶⁴A wooden pestle and mortar especially used to make fire in ancient Nandi households

making fire. It meant we were in a position to light our own “fire,” which meant making our own children.

For the next ceremony, all men remained outside as the women, including my mother, remained inside with the bride. The bride was then taught on how to manage her household. She later cooked as part of the ceremony.

When the food was ready, she first brought a stool for me, her husband. She brought water for washing our hands. At first I would not accept. Finally she made a promise, “If ever my kinsfolk will remember me, I will also remember you.” That meant that if she received a cow from her kinsfolk as they had promised her, I would also benefit from that gift.

How could a woman own a whole cow in my kraal if it was not jointly owned by both of us? That was unthinkable. How could she ever boast of owning a cow in my compound? Never! She would mismanage mine and let hers flourish. *Never!*

And kneeling before me she poured water on my hands as smoothly as she could without the water making any sound as it touched my hands. That was part of the ceremony. Nobody wanted a quarrelsome marriage. She did the same to my age-mates before she brought food, which we ate happily.

That was the beginning of our family.

And it was many, many years ago.

13

Asis kept us together all these years, and has blessed our marriage with children. I never married another woman. My wife proved to be the best woman for me. She has become indispensable to me in all areas of our life. The “fire” that we had lit during that ceremony long ago, has kept us warm all along.

God has blessed us with children who are happily married, and have grandchildren. Our marriage has weathered many storms.

We have watched many seasons changing, through many generations. We raised many animals and food crops. We have had our own share of sorrows like diseases, deaths, wars and famine.

14

Unfortunately, as I await to hear the summons from the land of the ancestors, my soul is not at peace. The haunting memories of our raid on the helpless people of Kony, our relatives, keep tormenting me. Our warriors indeed wronged the Kony people. Until today bitterness has persisted between the Kony and our people. The men, who participated in the massacre of the Kony, never lived to see their families. They never enjoyed the wretched animals they had acquired from raiding the Kony as they had thought. I keep praying to *Asis* that our kinsmen, the Kony, should forgive us, the Nandi, and our land. I know that many innocent lives perished, but there is a time to say *Oiyo*.⁶⁵

Please, please, please forgive us, I pray. Yes, we erred but there is a saying that *Chasei tany ak kobo kelyen angwan*.⁶⁶

⁶⁵Sorry

⁶⁶A cow slips in spite of its four legs.

*Oiyo kap kuugo!*⁶⁷ I shout again and again as I face *Tulwab Kony*.⁶⁸ I repent on behalf of our people. Our people at home never expected such behaviour from my age-set of Kaplelach. They had counselled us against such excessive attitudes against our kin. We had been told never to aim at killing any person since the Kony are our relatives. But our age-mates were carried away with the greed and vanity of war, and surely perished on the way. The curse destroyed them before they could reach home. I beg for mercy on their behalf and the Nandi land as a whole.

The sound of wailing of those innocent people in that cave keeps haunting me. I cannot forget the havoc our warriors wreaked in that *irimet*.⁶⁹

Also, I cannot forget the wailing of our people when only four out of four hundred warriors could return home.

*Woi! Woi! Woi ! Woi!, lagokyok!*⁷⁰

Looking back, I feel that we deserved the calamity that had befallen us after massacring our innocent relatives, the Kony. Our evil deed had been justly repaid.

⁶⁷Sorry, grandfather's family!

⁶⁸The present day Mount Elgon, the home of the Kony people in ancient times

⁶⁹Fortress

⁷⁰Alas, alas, alas, alas, our children!

I am now too old and soon I hope to join my departed friends in the wonderful land of *Sheu*.⁷¹ Each day their summons is getting more powerful than before. They are telling me that harvesting is at hand and food is plenty. I can hear their merriment and see their land.

It is a beautiful land. My friends are telling me, “Hurry! Hurry!” And I feel strongly drawn towards this wonderful land and join my friends. Suddenly, I am much lighter, and I can stand again.

⁷¹The land of the spirits where all the departed beings, especially the ancestors reside.

Epilogue

Sigilai Arap Tormoi was found to have died in his sleep. He looked peaceful and satisfied after he had made peace with the sons of Kingo.

According to Kalenjin custom, it is erroneous to wail over the death of an aged person. People were happy as they told his story which had lived for many generations.

He was buried with full tribal honours.

Dying Voice

APPENDIX A

Nandi Clans and Their Totems

1.	<i>Mooi</i>	-	Crested crane/Elephant
2.	<i>Kipoiis</i>	-	Jackal/Cockroach
3.	<i>Kipkenda</i>	-	Bee/Frog
4.	<i>Toiyoi</i>	-	Soldier ant/Rain
5.	<i>Kipasiso</i>	-	Sun/Mole
6.	<i>Kipkoiitin</i>	-	Snake
7.	<i>Kipamui</i>	-	Ducker antelope
8.	<i>Kipieken</i>	-	Baboon
9.	<i>Kipkokos</i>	-	Buzzard
10.	<i>Talai</i>	-	Lion
11.	<i>Kipsirkoi</i>	-	Bush pig
12.	<i>Sokom</i>	-	Hawk
13.	<i>Kiptopke</i>	-	Monkey (<i>chereret</i>)
14.	<i>Kipaa</i>	-	Black monkey (<i>tisiet</i>)
15.	<i>Kamwaike</i>	-	Partridge
16.	<i>Tuungo</i>	-	Hyena
17.	<i>Kapchemuri</i>	-	Wild Cat

APPENDIX B

Nandi Age-Sets¹

There are seven age-sets with fixed names which are all in existence simultaneously and serve in a recurring cycle. Below are the names in the present (2001) order.

1. Nyongi
2. Maina
3. Chumo
4. Sawe
5. Kipkoimet
6. Kaplelach
7. Kimnyigei

NB: The age-set of Korongoro, that was the eighth, ceased functioning after its warrior members perished in Kavirondo war. Due to the misfortune it could not be remembered again. In the year 2001, there were very few Nyongi age-set members who were then still alive but in the isolated cases. Most of them are women who were married later in advanced age by departing age-set. At the time of going to the press, there were a few known aged men over one hundred and ten years but mostly were in the juniormost group of the Maina age-set, inaugurating a new age-set of Nyongi amounts to a total massacre of the older generation of the same. Such a thing is totally abhorred and was seen as an abomination to the living. Kimnyigei age-set groups got circumcised as from mid nineties (90s), and by the year 2003, a new age-set of Nyongi aged below thirty have started being circumcised.

¹The Nandi word for age-sets is *Ibinwek* (singular, *Ibinda*)

APPENDIX C

Nandi Age-Sets and Related Events

- 1923: Kimnyigei handed over leadership to senior Nyongi. Nyongi became warriors.
- 1925: *Setioot*¹ flowered closing Nyongi circumcision period.
- 1930: Maina circumcision opened. The eldest Maina members took over warriors' duties from the eldest Nyongi.
- 1933: *Setioot* flowered closing Maina circumcision period.
- 1938: All Maina age-set became officially warriors and Nyongi elders officially retired.
- 1944: *Setioot* flowered, which would have opened Chumo circumcision period, but did not.
- 1953: Sawe circumcision started.
- 1964: Kipkoimet circumcision started.
- 1977: Kaplelach circumcision started.
- 1993: Kimnyigei circumcision started.
- 2003: Nyongi circumcision (new cycle) started.

Since the names of the age-sets were fixed and rotated in a cycle, the age-set of a man can be known by knowing his father's, for the son usually belongs to the third age-set below that of his father i.e. the son of a man belonging to the Chumo age-set, would belong to the Kipkoimet age-set (see the order of age-sets in Appendix B).

¹*Setioot* is a special vegetation, which usually germinates after a period of seven to eight years. It matures rapidly. It signifies either the closing of an age-set circumcision period, or the opening of a new one for circumcision.

Since the age-set of Chumo, there have no longer been any closing or opening of circumcision periods. When 'setioot' flowered in 1944, a new age-set of Chumo could have been inaugurated but unfortunately Maina retained leadership instead of retiring.

Frustrations came upon the Chumo age-set who opted for circumcision in Kipsigis to protest against this abused procedure by the Maina. And that distorted further closing of circumcision periods. What is happening nowadays is a rather confused continuation of the exercise. Owing to the impact of modernization, age-sets are already under pressure of losing their grand traditional meaning, and the elaborate rites of the past, which validated and honoured the age-sets, have now almost completely disappeared.

APPENDIX D

Nandi Divisions¹

1. *Kapianga*
2. *Kapsile*
3. *Kakiboch*
4. *Kaptumoiis*
5. *Teping'ot*
6. *Parsieny*
7. *Kaptalam*
8. *Kapchepkendi*
9. *Cheptol*
10. *Kimng'oror*
11. *Murk ab Tuk*
12. *Kakimno*
13. *Kapsiondoi*
14. *Koileke*
15. *Tuken*
16. *Kamelilo*

¹The Nandi word for divisions is *Pororiet* (Plural, *Pororiosiek*). *Pororiet* means a tribal division comprising a group of clans living together.

Dying Voice

APPENDIX E

The Settlements of Nandi Divisions

Locations

1. ALDAI

2. CHESUMEI

3. EMKWEN

4. MOSOP

5. SOIIN

6. WARENG

Nandi Divisions

Kapianga, Kapsile,
Kakiboch, Kaptumois,
Teping'ot, Parsieny,
Kaptalam, Kapchepkendi

Teping'ot, Parsieny,
Cheptol, Kimng'oror,
Murk ab tuk, Kakimno

Kaptumoiis, Kapsiondoi,
Teping'ot Koileke,
Kakimno, Kakiboch,
Kapchepkendi,
Kaptalam, Tuken

Koileke, Kapchepkendi,
Kaptalam, Kakiboch

Kamelilo, Kapchepkendi,
Tuken

Teping'ot, Parsieny,
Kapchepkendi, Kamelilo.

Dying Voice

APPENDIX F

Glossary of Nandi Words and Proverbs

1. *Angochame kosiebe amalen lakwa?* Why have carnal knowledge of a minor?
2. *Asis* – God
3. *Asista* – The rising sun
4. *Boiyob tum* – Ceremonial elder
5. *Boiyot* – Elder
6. *Burasta* – Anthrax
7. *Chebopkoiyo/chebonamoni* – Attributes of God.
8. *Cheloleit* – Cholera
9. *Chamgei* – Greetings (Literally, an expression of love)
10. *Chasei tany ak kobo kelyen angwan* – A cow slips though it has four legs
11. *Chemwaiit* – A cow paid for cementing relationship through marriage
12. *Chep-nyo-gaa* – A cow awarded to a first wife by her husband
13. *Chep-segutiet* – A cow awarded to a man's first wife by husband
14. *Chep-tiilet* – A traditional song danced during boys' initial circumcision ceremonies.
15. *Cherangany* – A kalenjin tribe living cherangany hills commonly known as Sengwer/chepleng
16. *Emet* – land
17. *Gorikab kumalisiek* – Kony traditional houses with roofs
18. *Gotab tumdo* – A house set apart for ceremonial rituals
19. *Indonyoliet* – Leglets
20. *Injoget* – A ritual of retribution and cleansing carried out by women against men who had violated women.

21. *Itoiik* – A special type of dried wood for sweetening/ preserving milk
22. *Kalenjin* – A cluster of formerly pastoralist tribes with the same language. These are the Kipsigis, the Tugen, the Keiyo, the Marakwet, the Pokot, the Kony, the Pongomek, the Mosopcho, the Sabiny, the Terik, the Nandi, and the Sengwer. They cover the best part of Rift Valley with the exception of the far south and the far north.
23. *Kamoriongo* – The Maasai land
24. *Kamoriongek* – The Maasai people.
25. *Kapchekendi* – A Nandi clan
26. *Kakile oiyo* – We are sorry
27. *Kapkiyaa* – A Cleansing ceremony marked by water emersion being one of circumcision rites.
28. *Kapkiitany* – A place where iron implements were forged and made.
29. *Kapkoross* – A family altar set on designated holy ground
30. *Kapkorosuut* – A place of family worship
31. *Kap kuugo* – Grandfather's family
32. *Kapkwambisi* – A place where Kony lived at time of attack
33. *Kaplelach* – The name of one of the age-sets
34. *Kaponyony* – A place for introducing boys to circumcision rituals
35. *Kaptalam* – The name of a Nandi division.
36. *Kapterioot* – A protected area outside main house where girl's circumcision initiates rest
37. *Ke benet* – A cave
38. *Kebet –lool* – tearing a bag during divorce
39. *Kemur* – Close the way ahead
40. *Kenu koomet korire* – In crying your mother is a liar
41. *Kerebet* – A traditional dish
42. *Kerkei kipseet ak kiptep* – Both a homestayer and a raider are same.
43. *Ketip-kipeles* – A tree planted by Kipeles to make the boundary of Nandi land to the West.

44. *Kiamei ngui agoi keityi ole mi chego* – It is usually in order to eat vegetables till when milk is available – It means patience pays.
45. *Kigirei* – Something closed with anathema
46. *Kipkarkarek* – Anklets
47. *Kipkoimet* – The name of one of the age-sets
48. *Kipoeet* – A traditional cloak
49. *Kipraut* – A small leather pouch used by elders to keep their tobacco and snuff
50. *Kiptaiyat* – A leader – (pl. Kiptainik)
51. *Kitoonget* – A traditional basket
52. *Kogo* – Grandmother.
53. *Konech sapon* – Give us health
54. *Kony* – A kalenjin tribe living around Mt. Elgon.
55. *Koreek Kutwo* – A cow awarded to the first wife for making her husband remove his headdress during marriage conclusion ceremony when the man was shaved for the first time in life.
56. *Koroseek* – Sacred plants used during ceremonies.
57. *Koseet luget* – Provide war materials e.g. food for warriors going to war.
58. *Kuumin* – Lit. honey, it was actually the elders' favourite word to describe traditional beer.
59. *Lakwa* – Child (pl *lagook*)
60. *Lapootyet* – Sodom apple plant or fruits (pl *lapotik*)
61. *Lopcho* – A curse for perishment.
62. *Ma-mei ilat ket oeng* – Lighting cannot strike a tree twice.
63. *Machutei ngwonet ye mami korotik* – A poisonous arrow cannot enter where there is no blood.
64. *Ma kiborjin kimageet susut* – Do not show a hyena your teeth strength for it's jaws are much stronger.
65. *Ma-kiloktoi ngor chebut* – One should not wear a garment with a hairy caterpillar in it.
66. *Ma-kitore ndara* – After foolish action comes a remorse.

67. *Ma-kiribei pai buch ama-am toroi* – One never guards his crops unless invaded by pigs.
68. *Makiroriot* – Bracelets
69. *Makisorune kororia ma* – A feather cannot be retrieved from fire.
70. *Manyatta* – a maasai homestead
71. *Mat ab arap belat* – A fire that burnt somebody's father
72. *Memene che kimene cheptol* – Don't be puffed up like the people of cheptol.
73. *Menjet* – A seclusion hut reserved for circumcised boys
74. *Metorokte teku* – If you see danger ahead, do not take risk and go and meet it, but hide till the danger has passed.
75. *Motirioot* – A god parent in circumcision and marriage ceremonies.
76. *Muren/Murenik* – A warrior/warriors
77. *Nariet* – Headgear worn by an elder.
78. *Nda ngebarin koborjin tany* – If you must be killed it should be for a cow.
79. *Nganymetieet* – Leading warriors composed of spies.
80. *Ngemechi ano ketogosune ano* – Wherever you die doesn't matter for either way no climbing out
81. *Ngetunoteet* - A graduating ceremony after circumcision seclusion period
82. *Ngioimechi poton kelok* – Let us put our trembling legs together in one place and we shall obtain support from the other.
83. *Njor* – Inner room in main house for flocks
84. *Ngoriet* – Garment, ngoroik – pl
85. *Okyek* – The Dorobo – people whose dependency are forests
86. *Oiyo* – sorry
87. *Oldimdo* – rear group of warriors to war
88. *Orkoiyot* – Nandi seer and medicineman
89. *Osiek* – A girls' pelvic apron made out of leather strips
90. *Pirtik* – security men in war

91. *Ratet* – First marriage that involves tying with the sacred plants (sekutiet). The ceremony marks betrothal.
Rokyet – Piece of a broken earthen pot.
92. *Samburto* – Middle group of warriors composed of elders in charge of food advices.
93. *Sekutiet* – Sacred plants used in marriages.
94. *Sere-or-nyo* – Grace be to you, my clan's man.
95. *Setyoot* – Mass of vegetation that grows after a period of seven-eight years marking an end of circumcision for an age-set and also opening the circumcision of a new age-set. But in between is an eight-year period.
96. *Sheu* – The land of the spirits where all the departed beings, especially the ancestors reside.
97. *Sigis* – To sire an offspring
98. *Sinendeet* – A sacred climbing plant used in erecting family altars.
99. *Sirinto* – Ornament of wire worn by girls and women pl-sirimwogik
100. *Sonoek* – beads
101. *Soosik* – Gourds
102. *Sorik* – worthless men
103. *Soteet* – Gourds
104. *Suatinik* – Live animals led and later used as food during raid journeys.
105. *Suum* – Temporary partition found in main house for girls' initiates in seclusion.
106. *Takwenya* – greetings for girls
107. *Tapakwet* – armlets
108. *Tarusiek* – circumcision initiates in seclusion period
109. *Tereet* – earthen pot
110. *Tipchu* – You girls. The way to address warriors, for security purposes during military operations,
111. *Tokwek* – Outposts
112. *Toloek* – Colastral/male's first seeds – semen.
113. *Tukwech chuto* – Cover (for us) these ones

Dying Voice

The Author

The Reverend. Andrew Kiptoo Arap Tanui, born in 1952 in Kabarus Village, Cheborge Division, in the then Kericho District, is the third born son of Mr. Lawrence Kiptanui Arap Sang (Kapsiirng'ot) of Kipkenda clan (Sololo) and the late Mrs. Esther Jemutai Sang (Kabargero) of Kapchemusarek clan.

He got his primary education in Cheborge School (1960 to 1964) when his parents migrated to Kaptumo in Nandi District. He continued his primary education in both Kaboi and Kipchawat schools. He joined Kaptel secondary school in 1972 and in 1973 where he obtained a K.J.S.E Certificate.

He was employed as an un-trained teacher in 1974 and served many schools in southern Nandi. In the course of his teaching he did 'O' and 'A' levels in 1976 and 1979 respectively.

He joined St. Paul's United Theological College, Limuru in 1983 for Ordained Ministry. He later obtained a diploma certificate from Makerere University College and a certificate in theological Studies from Nairobi University College in 1985. He was ordained as a Deacon in 1985 and was made a priest in 1986 in the Anglican Church of Kenya (then C.P.K).

He has served the Anglican Church in many parishes dedicative in the greater Eldoret Diocese and currently in Kitale See. He is a born again, saved, Christian.

He is married to Jeniffer Jemutai Tanui. The Tanuis are blessed with four children.

Dying Voice



The subject of cattle-raids carried out by various nomadic communities on their counterparts is a subject of interest, intrigue and misinterpretation. Unfortunately, this phenomenon continues to this day in many African countries causing at times untold loss of life and property.

What was the original purpose of cattle-raids in the concerned nomadic communities? How exactly were the raids carried out? What were the norms and taboos governing cattle-raids and wars in the traditional tribal folklore? Is cattle-raiding compatible with the modern society? Is it acceptable for perpetrators of modern cattle-raiding to hide behind "tradition" and justify their criminal activities?

The above are some of the questions that inspired the author of this book to undertake a serious and ardent research, lasting over a period of eleven years, into the phenomenon of cattle-raiding in one particular African nomadic community the Nandi.

The result of the author's long research is presented in the unusual format of this novel.

The *Dying Voice* belongs to Sigilai arap Tormoi, a celebrated Nandi warrior and the narrator of the story, now a venerable old man. As he looks back with nostalgia and tells us his story, we are rewarded with details of the Nandi traditional cultural life. These details are at some times amusing, at other times startling, but all the times valuable. The book, containing a wealth of Nandi cultural folklore, terms and proverbs in the original language, and photographs, can prove to be a valuable reservoir of information to the student and teacher of cultural anthropology.

The Author

The Reverend Andrew Kiptoo Arap Tanui, a priest in the Diocese of Kitale (Anglican Church of Kenya), was born in 1952 as the third son of Mr. Lawrence Kiptanui Arap Sang (*Kapsirng'ot*) of Kipkenda clan (*Sololo*) and the late Mrs. Esther Jemutai Sang (*Kabagero*) of *Kapchemusarek* clan. He studied at St. Paul's United Theological College, Limuru (Kenya),



He is married to Jeniffer Jemutai Tanui. The Tanuis are blessed with four children.

ISBN 978-9966-9925-3-6



9 789966 992536